

All of the heroes and all of the men, couldn't save Tommy from getting kidnapped again

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All of the heroes and all of the men, couldn't save Tommy from getting kidnapped again

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Summary

Silently, majestically, the universe whirled around an invisible axis. Stars flowered and died, galaxies collided and faded, planets spun and broke apart. The currents of space and time wove through it all, ebbing and flowing, tracing unfathomable patterns of purple and blue across the darkness, locked together in the dance of eternity.

Somewhere, lost in the midst of the chaos, two insignificant little realities were caught on the currents, swept gently across the great expanses of nothingness that surrounded them. Gradually, inevitably, they were drawn closer, closer, leaving twin trails of light in their wake. And as the gap between them grew ever smaller, as their lights intermingled and crackling sparks were snapped into fiery life, a rift tore itself into being.

This was no slight rift, and yet no world-shattering collision.

This was a Crossover.

Only yesterday, Dream had stolen Tommy and taken him beyond the boundaries of their world. Now, the Syndicate assembles to go after them. Whether they have to fight the strongest defenders of the other world or work with former enemies, they are going to find Tommy and bring him back—no matter the costs.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Silently, majestically, the universe whirled around an invisible axis. Stars flowered and died, galaxies collided and faded, planets spun and broke apart. The currents of space and time wove through it all, ebbing and flowing, tracing unfathomable patterns of purple and blue across the darkness, locked together in the dance of eternity.

Somewhere, lost in the midst of the chaos, two insignificant little realities were caught on the currents, swept gently across the great expanses of nothingness that surrounded them. Gradually, inevitably, they were drawn closer, *closer*, leaving twin trails of light in their wake. And as the gap between them grew ever smaller, as their lights intermingled and crackling sparks were snapped into fiery life, a rift tore itself into being.

Such occurrences were not unusual across the relentlessly shifting folds of eternity. Countless realities, each drifting aimlessly along infinite different trajectories, often crossed paths. Tiny rifts were common; formed each time realities tumbled together, scattering thoughts, ideas, and stories across infinite different worlds. Even collisions, capable of binding two entirely distinct realities into one, were not a rare occurrence.

This, however, was different.

This was no slight rift, and yet no world-shattering collision. The realities did not break apart, swept back along their fated paths, but still, they did not rush together to reshape the worlds within.

They caught, swirled, wrapped around each other in a whirling orbit, each encompassing a singular point.

This was no collision.

This was a *Crossover*.

And that was how, in the shadows of a dingy, forgotten back alley somewhere in New York, a tall, roughly rectangular obsidian frame appeared out of nowhere.

It scared the shit out of Josh, who leaped to his feet, wide-eyed. The few strays that he had been sharing the contents of the dumpster with fled for their lives, skittering out of sight.

For a moment, the frame just stood there—solid, imposing, and utterly unmoving. And then, with a hum, it sparked to life. Starting from the center of the hollow frame, a toxic green light spread rapidly, swirling and writhing, reaching out towards the edges, filling the empty space.

Josh didn't have the faintest idea why it had appeared here out of all places, but he did know exactly what it was. He'd seen enough movies and read enough books to recognize it. Three

years before he'd even seen the real deal. He knew a portal when he saw one. And he knew full well that in his reality, mysterious portals were never a good thing.

The last time one had appeared high in the skies above New York, it had spewed only trouble. Josh still remembered the chaos and panic of that time: running for safety as great metallic monsters flew above, taking whole buildings down with them, and twisted gray-faced aliens tore through the streets, killing anyone in sight.

Before he had time to hesitate, he turned to run. Be it aliens, demons, or whichever otherworldly beasts had come to try to conquer his world this time, he was getting the hell out of their way.

But before he had taken more than three steps, the portal *screamed*.

Josh lunged for cover, diving behind the trash cans as panic surged through his veins. The scream grew louder, unearthly, and piercing. Josh clamped his hands over his ears to try and block out the awful noise that had become a howl, tearing at the air, shaking dust and chips of brick from the walls. The ground rumbled with the force of it, and tiny fractures split open across the surface of the filthy concrete. Josh squeezed his eyes shut, shuddering in the shadows behind the dumpster, hoping it would end.

And then, just as suddenly as it had all begun, it stopped, leaving deafening silence in its wake.

Trembling from head to foot, Josh forced his eyes back open and slowly turned around. Through a gap between the bins, he could just see the portal. The frame was still there, shedding acidic light onto the alleyway. But the alleyway was no longer empty.

Something- or rather *someone* - had come through the portal.

The alien looked human-like, Josh thought. They wore some kind of armor, deep purple and etched with swirling symbols, and had a shield emblazoned with a red X slung across their back. Josh shivered as he saw the glimmering sword strapped at their side.

This wasn't good. He needed to run, but... how?

The alien fully emerged from the light and glanced around quickly, thankfully not noticing Josh, then turned back, reaching behind the curtain of rippling light for something.

A second figure emerged, clad in similar armor, cradling something in their arms. Despite himself, Josh strained to get a better look as the newcomer handed it to the first with some difficulty and had to restrain a horrified gasp as the scarce light of the portal revealed what they were holding.

The thing, bundled in the first creature's arms, was a *person* .

A regular teenage boy, by the look of him- tall and lanky, with bruises painting his too-pale skin and bloodstains streaking through his blond hair. He was clearly unconscious, or

worse... he lay so still, head slumped against the metal chestplate of the thing carrying him, eyes closed. Josh couldn't tell if he was breathing.

The creatures, evidently unconcerned about the state of their hostage, were staring out at their surroundings, gazing this way and that. The second one, a white circle mask rendering their features inscrutable, tilted their, seeming intrigued by their surroundings. The other one didn't seem to share in his companion's wonder though.

"What the hell?" he muttered. "What *is* this place?"

Meanwhile, in a different reality- one far more aware of its own existence as merely one of many- a group of anarchists had gathered for a meeting, concealed in a base hidden deep beneath the northern snow.

Technoblade, the... *founder* of the group- anarchists have no leaders, after all- was sitting at the meeting table in the center of the Syndicate's headquarters. Quill in hand, rewriting their anarchist manifesto, adapting each principle to match the circumstances of the server. He was finding it tough to concentrate, though, given Phil's incessant pacing around the room.

Niki, too, was fidgeting with the ender pearl of her stasis chamber. Though she tried to hide it, it was clear that she was just as anxious as Phil.

Their youngest member, Lethe- or Ranboo- was conspicuously absent.

"The meeting was meant to start an hour ago," Phil fretted, still pacing back and forth. "What if he's hurt, or- or trapped? What if he needs our help?"

"He might have just forgotten about the meeting," Niki reasoned, sounding as though she was trying to convince herself more than anyone.

Phil snorted. "I don't believe that. I saw him writing it down to make sure he'd remember! If he's not here now, something's gotta be wrong."

"We could use his stasis chamber?" Niki's fidgeting was growing worse. Techno could hear the worry in her voice.

"I'm genuinely considering it. I swear, if he gets hurt-"

Techno sighed and put the quill down. "No, Phil, think about it. The stasis chambers are for emergencies. You can't use them every single time you get nervous, and you can't use them without getting permission from the person beforehand. We've talked about this."

"But Ranboo is hurt," Phil pressed, his tattered wings fluttering anxiously. "He is probably out there, bleeding in a ditch, waiting for us to come save him right now!"

"Phil, be reasonable here..." Techno replied calmly, resting his hands on the tabletop. "The meetings aren't mandatory. Maybe something else came up, and he decided not to come."

Maybe he's mining and lost track of time. There's nothing to show that he's in any kind of trouble, and it isn't fair on him to drag him back here for no reason."

Phil whirled around, running a hand through his already tangled hair. "But what if-"

"He's half ender, remember- he can teleport himself just fine." Techno reminded him. "And he's been training with me for months. He can handle himself against pretty much anyone on the server by now."

With a faint growl of frustration, Phil collapsed into his chair, evidently worn out. Without looking at either of them, he stretched out his good wing and began straightening the feathers. Techno kept a sharp eye on his friend, already prepared to intervene if Phil began to yank them out, as he had the unfortunate tendency to do when stressed.

Silence fell over the room, broken only by the faint rustle as Phil's delicate quills were nudged none-too-gently back into place, and the occasional clink of the ender pearl against Niki's rings. Techno could almost feel the mounting tension.

"Look," he sighed, feeling unprepared for the complex task of comforting his fellow anarchists. "It'll be alright. Ranboo's smart, he's capable, he's- I'm sure he'll-"

He paused as the familiar sound of pistons drifted through the chamber. Someone had entered the Syndicate headquarters, and there was only one person- other than themselves- who knew where the base was located. Techno felt a quiet surge of relief.

All three turned expectantly toward the doorway as footsteps echoed down the short hall. Phil rose to his feet, preening forgotten, and was halfway around the table before the door burst open.

The anarchists froze.

Silhouetted against the darkness of the hall stood a short, stocky figure, wearing well-polished netherite armor and a worn axe slung across his back. The former president of L'Manberg squared his shoulders and met Techno's sour expression with a fierce glare; an unmistakable, unspoken challenge.

Before Techno could move, Ranboo ducked into view just behind Tubbo, and rested a hand on his shoulder. He stood with a hunch even more pronounced than usual, his brow furrowed with worry, and shrank back even further the moment he glanced at Techno.

"Ranboo-" Techno passed a hand over his eyes and fought to keep most of the anger from his voice. "There was *one* rule..."

"I know, *I know*," Ranboo chirped hastily, his voice trembling. "But- we need your help. *Please*. We- I don't think we're gonna be able to do this on our own, and- this is-" He hesitated, staring around at the Syndicate with desperation in his eyes. He seemed on the verge of tears.

Tubbo, meanwhile, had folded his arms. “I don’t *need* anything from you.” Though his tone was steady, Techno could hear the strained notes. “I’m only here because Boo thought it would be a good idea.”

Alright. Evidently, something had happened, something big. Ranboo may be forgetful, but even he knew better than to bring a former president to the secret headquarters of the Syndicate. Whatever it was, it called for drastic measures- drastic enough that Tubbo, of all people, was now standing in the hidden heart of the anarchist base.

For now, Techno ignored Tubbo’s belligerent glare, and turned to Ranboo instead, unable to hide the urgency in his voice. “What’s going on?”

“It’s- it’s Dream.” Ranboo shivered as he spoke, his tail lashing back and forth. “H-he took Tommy. I th-think they managed to get o-off world-”

“*What?*” Phil’s wings flared wide, wide enough to brush one of the columns that flanked the meeting table.

“Hold on- Tommy’s... gone?” Niki’s expression was unreadable, even as the ender pearl slipped from her grasp, falling back into the stasis chamber with a faint splash.

Panic was beginning to settle in. It spread through the room like a poisonous gas, carried by anxious voices and shaking hands.

“Alright, everyone calm down,” Techno said, doing his best to restore some kind of order. “Start from the beginning.”

“We don’t have *time!*” Ranboo cried, near hysteria. “We have to go, *now*, Dream’s going to kill him!” Beside him, Tubbo seemed calmer, reaching out to grasp Ranboo’s hand in his own as he began to talk.

“Dream- he wants Tommy for something. I don’t know why, or what he wants, but whatever it is, it’s nothing good.” Though his face was carefully schooled into neutrality- a habit picked up from hours of political meetings- his voice was grim. “He built a portal, only it wasn’t a nether portal- the frame was crying obsidian, and it glowed green, not purple. And- and he and Punz- they took Tommy through it.” He hesitated, his mask of calm splintering at the edges, and Ranboo gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “Sam went after him, with George and Sapnap, but...” Tubbo trailed off, shaking his head. “They haven’t answered their communicators since.”

“They took him off-world...” Phil seemed slightly dazed, staring across the table at Tubbo. Then, his fists clenched at his sides, and he gave his head a little shake to clear it. “Right. We’ll get him back. We have to.”

“Prime...” Techno felt the beginnings of a killer headache flare to life in his temples. “Alright, we’re gonna need supplies. Phil- get to the armory, grab as much weaponry as possible. Niki, would you help me brew some potions?”

“On it.” She answered immediately. “I’ve got the materials at my house. I’ll grab some food supplies and my extra weapons as well, I have plenty.”

“Good.” Techno turned back to Tubbo and Ranboo. “Have either of you seen the other world? Do you know what to expect?”

“No idea.” Though Tubbo’s face was still carefully blank, Techno didn’t miss the brief flash of relief in his eyes. Perhaps Tubbo had needed them more than he’d let on. “We didn’t know if we’d be able to make it back if we went in- we didn’t want to risk it without...” His voice trailed off, and he raised his chin as if expecting to be challenged.

Techno merely nodded his approval. “Good thinking.” Rapidly, he got to his feet. “Alright. You two,” he gestured towards the doorway, where Ranboo and Tubbo still stood, “give us a hand with gathering the supplies. Then- don’t argue- you’ve both gotta go home. Let me and Phil deal with this, okay?”

“No.” Tubbo’s response was instant.

“I’m coming too, Techno.” Niki informed him evenly. Techno glanced at her briefly and then gave a nod that was both assent, and a silent apology for not including her earlier. They had trained side by side for months, and she was far tougher than anyone seemed to give her credit for. She could handle whatever the new world threw at her. Tubbo and Ranboo, however...

“Not every server is like this one,” Phil said quietly. “We could easily be headed for a hardcore world. One mistake there, and you’re out.” His eyes were shadowed. “No respawns, no canon lives. No second chances.”

“And it’ll be even more dangerous, given that Dream is already on the other side. Prime knows what traps he’ll have set up.” Techno looked around the room, meeting the stares of each in turn. “If you go, there’s a high chance that you won’t be coming back.”

For a second, Tubbo glanced back at Ranboo, and his grim expression wavered. Then he squared his jaw and turned to glare at Techno.

“As I said, Technoblade,” Bracing one hand against the tabletop, Tubbo vaulted up onto it. He crossed it in three strides until he stood eye-to-eye with his former foe. “We’re going through whether you come with us or not. This is non-negotiable.”

Technoblade sighed, his headache growing, and looked down at Tubbo’s boots to check that he wasn’t treading dirt onto his table. Irritatingly, slushy footprints now marred the pristine warped planks. At the very least, the ancient End portal frame was left unscathed.

The End portal frame...

Techno glanced from the frame, up to Phil, whose unmantelled wings still brushed the walls. The ruin of his left wing was painfully obvious against the eerie glow of soulfire lamps.

Inspiration struck like a lightning bolt. Techno's gaze dropped back to the table, mind racing like wildfire, each piece falling into place. *The eyes are in a chest in my house, Dream is hosting DreamXD, I know exactly what lies forgotten in the empty hull of an abandoned End ship.*

"Alright, Tubbo," he said, "You can come. Now, if I were you, I'd get off of that pretty table, cause it isn't going to be looking that pretty for much longer."

Out of the corner of his eye, Techno caught Phil's concerned frown.

"Hope you don't mind, Phil," he called, barely able to restrain his grin. "But since DreamXD's host is conveniently off-world right now, he won't be able to stop us so... You wanna break the server's only rule with me?"

Light sparked to life in Phil's eyes, though there was still a confused little furrow between his brows. "That's brilliant, mate, but- why?"

Fully aware that he was now grinning like a madman, and not really caring, Techno drew his axe from his inventory. "I've got an idea."

"That's- it's really uncomfortable, Techno," Phil complained. He had been patiently holding out his sore wings for the last five minutes, but the ache was beginning to get to him. Over the last few weeks, they had stayed mantelled against his back, stretched only when he needed to preen them. He had barely used them- and never actually flown on them since- since Wilbur-

"Sit still." Techno's calm voice broke through his thoughts, even as he continued to fiddle with something behind Phil's back. "You trust me, right?"

"Mate, you know I wouldn't have let you near my wing if I didn't." Phil's reassurance was gentle, despite the slight strain in his tone. "Doesn't change how uncomfortable it is to have you behind me doing something to it that I can't see."

Phil had only flinched a little when Techno had asked for permission to touch the damaged limb. It wasn't as if he hadn't touched it before, nudging ruffled feathers back into place with the utmost care, the two sprawled out on a cold floor, listening to the howling winds of the Antarctic outside...

He didn't know what Techno had in mind, but he did know that he trusted his friend with his life. Technoblade would never- *never*- hurt him.

With a little huff of sympathy, Techno gave Phil's shoulder a brief, reassuring squeeze. "I'm almost done now."

Phil nodded, and sighed, stretching out his good wing to preen it. For a minute, the two sat in silence, lost in their tasks, fingers buried in layers of dark feathers.

They had spent hours deep in the shadows of the End. Fighting the dragon had taken some time, of course, but very little; it was not the first dragon that Phil had defeated, and there wasn't much that could hold back Technoblade. Especially when someone he cared about was in danger.

No, their time had been spent cutting their way through the twisty halls and crooked staircases of an End City, gathering armor and weapons, and shulker shells enchanted into miniature inventories. None of them would be forced to brave a new world empty-handed.

And, for the first time in *months*, Phil had been able to fly again. Or... glide, at least. The weightless effects of shulker shots, so deadly to other players, had been a blessing; holding him aloft when his ruined wing failed him, allowing him to swoop once again through the inky skies.

If it had not been for the thought of Tommy, trapped, in pain, needing help, Phil would have stayed for days, weeks, simply delighting in the glorious feeling of being back where he belonged.

The shulkers themselves were no threat to him once he was in the air. It had been the best he had felt in a very long time, and now the guilt of enjoying himself whilst Tommy was in danger felt crushing.

Phil had wanted to go after him immediately, and Tubbo and Ranboo had agreed. Techno had been the voice of reason; they were in no condition to take on whatever lurked on the other side of that portal- alongside fighting Dream- if they were not fully prepared. Niki had sided with him; if they were to go to a different world, they had to be prepared for anything and everything.

They were right, of course. Techno was always right. How he managed to remain calm, despite the panic and the chaos, Phil didn't know, but he was grateful, as always, for his friend's clearheadedness.

While the two of them had been battling shulkers, Niki and Ranboo had headed to the woodland mansion marked on one of Techno's maps. Together, they picked off the evokers with bows, allowing Ranboo to teleport in and out, snatching the totems of undying as he went.

Tubbo, too, had worked furiously, brewing potions, laying fresh enchantments on weapons, repairing armor, consolidating food supplies.

They were prepared. Whatever lay behind the rippling green light of that god damned portal, they would be ready to meet it. Now to eat, and snatch a couple of hours sleep before dawn, when they would leave their server.

Without warning, Techno let go of his wing. Phil startled, brought sharply back to earth, and looked around.

"Alright," Techno stepped carefully around him, eyes fixed on his damaged wing. "You can try moving it... Slowly! Phil, be careful-"

Heedless of his friend's words, Phil yanked his wing forwards, twisting his head to get a proper look, and gasped in shock.

The light spilling out through the open doorway glimmered over the glossy black feathers of the wing, as though droplets of gold were scattered across it. And looking down, down, down where he had feared to look for months, the shining darkness disappeared- and was replaced by a shimmering purple membrane.

The elytra wing seemed to glow in the warm lantern light. It fitted seamlessly to the wing, melding smoothly against the awful gaps, waving gently back and forth with every ripple of Phil's feathers. Delicate straps wound around it, binding it snugly in place; no plummeting descent would tear it from him. It was his, imperfect and fragile and precious and *perfect*.

Phil remembered, for the briefest of seconds, the moment Techno had found the wings. Displayed on a splintering stand, deep in the dusty hull of a ghostly End ship, Techno had been the one to reach them first. Phil had smiled, congratulated him, and fought desperately to restrain the vicious, bitter flare of jealousy in his heart. It was hardly his friend's fault, after all.

Techno had held the elytra as though it were made of spun glass, as though any breath of wind would tear it apart. When Phil had descended the steps, he had been holding them up, as if he were trying to gauge their width in his head, keeping them aloft with his fingertips, frightened even to crease them. And then Techno had seen him and beamed, and Phil had done his best to grin back. He had even offered to teach Techno how to use them properly, though his friend had shaken his head ruefully.

"We don't have time, Phil. Learning to fly is damned hard. And I've never really used them before, I'd be learning from the ground up." He paused and smiled faintly. "Quite literally."

Slowly this time, Phil stretched out his wing, gazing at the prosthetic with pure wonder. It followed his movement seamlessly, perfectly matched to the natural feathers. Carefully, he lifted the wing higher, feeling the weight; slightly heavier than he was used to, but nothing that he couldn't compensate for.

Heart hammering, he spread both wings wide and beat them gently back and forth. The prosthetic held, tight against the feathers, and air currents sent iridescent swirls across the surface of the membrane.

It was *beautiful*.

Something was blurring Phil's vision, fracturing the world into streaks of bright colors. He blinked and then brought a hand up to his face. To his surprise, his fingers came back shining with tears. "The elytra..." He whispered, amazed that he could even speak past the tightness in his throat. "This is what you wanted it for?"

"Well... I didn't wanna get your hopes up, in case I couldn't actually do it, but..." Techno shrugged nonchalantly, as though he hadn't realized, somehow, that he had just given Phil the most wondrous, exquisite, perfect gift of his life.

Dazed and elated, Phil tried to laugh, and let out a kind of choked squeak that would, at any other moment, have left him cringing with embarrassment. But now, all he could do was step forward, and all but throw himself at Techno. The tears flowed freely as he wrapped his arms

around his friend's chest, clinging on as though he would never let go. Techno chuckled softly as he returned the hug, and then gave a quiet sniff, almost as if maybe, just maybe, he was struggling to hold back tears of his own. "Sappy old man."

"*Shut,*" Phil declared and then buried his face into Techno's shoulder. Safely hidden, he sniffled faintly, and whispered, "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Techno replied, clearing his throat. Carefully, he lowered Phil to the ground, evidently trying to maintain some semblance of composure. "We'll need you at your full strength tomorrow. We have no idea what we're going into. And-" For the briefest of moments, he paused. "We- we don't even know if Tommy-"

"Don't say it," Phil interrupted him. "He's still alive. Dream- he wants him for something. He wouldn't just kill him. He's still alive." Slowly, he breathed out. "He has to be."

"I hope you're right," Techno muttered and looked away. "Now, can you actually fly with this, or-"

Phil grinned, despite the shadows in his eyes, and before Techno could say another word, he was gone.

He was flying through the night skies.

He was flying through the clouds.

He was *flying*.

The wind rushed around him, caught him in intangible arms, and lifted him high, welcoming him home. Wisps of cloud brushed against his hair, his skin, his feathers, wreathing around his body like a halo. Moonlight fell from above, silvering the edges of his wings, making the elytra shine with an ethereal glow.

He was flying.

Not just gliding. Not held aloft by nothing more than a shulker shot.

His wings, his precious, flawed wings, carried him once more through the air, and he reveled in it.

For those few minutes, he allowed thoughts of Tommy to drift to the back of his mind. The pain and stress fell away, left down on the ground, and he soared above them, free and safe and exultant.

He twisted sharply in mid-air, chasing a brisk current of air, spiraling around it in tight little arcs. Then, he rose and swept back his wings, and with a whoop of pure joy, he dived.

Like an eagle with a mouse in its sights, he hurtled toward the ground. The wind screamed in his ears, as though begging him not to leave, and he grinned as he fell.

Far below, the door of Techno's house burst open, and two figures sprinted out; Niki and Ranboo, seeking the cause of the commotion. Distantly, Phil heard Ranboo's shriek of surprise, and his grin grew wider.

With seconds to spare, he snapped his wings out to their widest span and felt the stretch of the elytra as he swept forwards. Then, he was off once more, climbing higher and higher, listening to the faint cheers in the background. Unable to help himself, he fell backward, etching a loop into the clouds, just to show off. He caught himself in the air, turning to wave down at Techno, and laughed at the sight of his friend cringing at the narrow save. He had even spread out his arms, already prepared to catch Phil if he began to fall in earnest.

But Phil knew, knew from the beating of his wings to the thundering of his heart, that he would not fall.

Niki and Ranboo were applauding as Phil alighted, raising clouds of snow with his wingbeats. They ran towards him, all beaming smiles and delighted congratulations, and as they hugged him, Phil felt as though his chest would burst with happiness. Even Tubbo had emerged from the house, and though he hesitated before he spoke, his voice was warm. "It's really good to see you flying again, Phil."

Despite the cold, they stayed outside- giving Phil room to display his new wing- until Techno ushered them all inside for dinner.

They ate their fill of warm potato stew and began their final preparations. Phil passed out the shulker boxes while Tubbo spread potion bottles and fresh food across the table. Ranboo counted up the totems of undying before Techno gave Phil and Niki the materials for withers.

Half an hour later, their shulker boxes were neatly stacked with spare gear and supplies, stashed alongside gapples and totems. Their armour and weaponry, newly enchanted, were stowed within their inventories. They worked side by side, sharing out their materials, and it was only after Ranboo gave a great yawn that Phil insisted that they try to get a couple of hours sleep before dawn, and all but shooed him out the room. Niki followed soon afterward, her eyes red with tiredness, leaving Tubbo and Techno alone in the empty meeting room.

For a moment, there was silence. Then, Tubbo glanced up from his shulker box. "This feels familiar."

"Well," Techno replied, and hesitated, torn between sarcasm and honesty. "I- I hope this one ends a bit differently."

Tubbo nodded, avoiding his gaze. "Me too."

Quiet descended once again, and though it was far from comfortable, the tension had lessened somewhat. There was so much that remained unsaid. So much that had been done, and could not be taken back. For now, though, it could wait- at least until Tommy was back with them.

They were ready.

Tubbo slipped out of the room a minute later, looking for Ranboo, and Techno, too, left to find Phil. His friend had evidently decided to simply crash on the sofa for the night; he was

lying belly-down, face pressed into one of the cushions. His wings were strewn around him; the right one had already cascaded down to the floor. He had forgotten to remove the elytra, Techno noted with a frown- it wasn't really sensible to sleep with it in place.

Without thinking, he gave Phil a gentle nudge on the shoulder to wake him and moved to help him take it off.

Phil started awake with a gasp, and leaped to his feet, jerking the wing away. His hands flew up to guard the elytra, and he backed away, eyes wide, chest heaving. "Stop- don't-"

"Phil-" Techno's heart lurched, and he raised his own hands placatingly. "Phil, I wouldn't- I'm sorry- I should have warned-"

Breathing hard, Phil stilled, the glassy sheen fading from his gaze. He dropped his arms to his sides and tried to smile. "You're- you're alright, mate." The mask of calm was betrayed by the tremble in his voice, and Techno winced.

Slowly, he sat down on the sofa, heart heavy in his chest. A moment later, Phil perched beside him, wings fluttering softly. He leaned against Techno's shoulder, a silent signal of forgiveness, and sighed quietly.

"I'm sorry, Phil," Techno murmured. "But you've got to let me help. You can't take it off on your own, old man."

Phil inhaled and shuffled back on the sofa until he could see Techno's face. "Do we- do we *have* to take it off?" His voice was fragile and hesitant, and something frightened still lurked in his gaze.

Techno paused, horribly aware of how brittle his friend sounded. Phil was terrified. *Of him.*

He hated the thought, hated how delicate Phil looked. He didn't know what to do, how to help, how to free him from the shackles of painful memories and shadowed nightmares. that was Phil's specialty. Not his.

But he had to try.

"You can't sleep with it on, Phil," He said, as gently as he could. "But in the morning, the first thing we'll do is put it back on. I promise."

"But..."

"It's not a good idea for you to sleep with it on." He repeated, a little more firmly. "It could get damaged, and I only have one extra wing. I could repair it once or twice, but after that..."

Phil gazed at him with a trace of fear lingering in the depths of his bright blue eyes. But when he spoke, his voice was stronger. "First thing in the morning."

"First thing in the morning. I promise."

Another moment of hesitation. And then, finally, Phil relented. Slowly, he stretched out his left wing, just far enough to allow Techno to reach the straps holding the prosthetic in place.

With a quiet wave of relief, Techno leaned back towards him. He kept his movements as slow and careful as possible, doing his best to avoid startling his friend again. Phil winced at the contact but remained still.

The straps came undone beneath Techno's hands, and he lifted the elytra away. The dim lantern light fell over the exposed skin beneath; it was red and irritated from the chafing of the prosthetic. Techno grimaced, imagining how badly it must ache. How had Phil been able to fly like this?

"I'll add more padding to the straps." He said, quietly, wishing that Phil had mentioned it sooner. It wouldn't be hard to mend them.

Techno knew not to voice the reprimand aloud, though. It was clear that Phil felt terrible as it was.

He remembered the night that Phil had finally abandoned L'Manberg, a night of exhaustion and snowflakes and dull, pain-filled eyes.

They had sat on Techno's sofa, much the same way as they did now, and talked, talked long into the night, even as the crackling fire burned low in the grate. Techno suspected that it had been the first time that Phil had truly talked in weeks- he had caught glimpses of his friend, working and working and working, rebuilding what had been destroyed, fighting to shut out the truth that stared him in the face.

And then, safe in the snug warmth of an anarchist's snow-bound cabin, Phil had whispered, "They're gone, Techno. They're not going to heal. I can't- I won't be able-"

The sobs had started, slow and choked and trembling. "I'm never going to fly again."

Of course Phil hadn't mentioned the pain of the prosthetic. It was nothing, *nothing*, compared to the terror of being grounded once again.

Techno said none of this. The last thing he wanted to do was to dredge up any more of the sorrows in his friend's past. Instead, with the greatest of care, he smoothed out the feathers that had grown crumpled beneath the elytra, and asked, "How was the weight?"

There was a pause. "I- I felt it a bit. But it's not too much for me to compensate for." Phil admitted quietly.

"I can try to hollow out the frame a little more. Or there might be an enchantment that could lighten it a little. I'll have a look."

"That's... Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Techno replied, and smiled.

The dawn light illuminated the little party as they left the following morning, armed to the teeth and armor gleaming. It was Ranboo who built the portal- using the same crying obsidian as Dream- and lit it.

They all stared at the strange, acidic green swirl within the frame. Screams echoed around it; so similar to the whispery howls of an ordinary nether portal, and yet at the same time so different. More real. More... human.

“Last chance to turn back,” Techno said calmly, without taking his eyes off the portal.

“I don’t think so.” Tubbo’s response was immediate and stubborn. Techno sighed, but nodded wordlessly and approached the portal.

He had insisted on being the first through; he was, after all, the most prepared to take on any immediate threat. Phil and Niki flanked him, Ranboo kept behind them, and Tubbo took the rear.

This was it.

Only yesterday, Dream had stolen Tommy, and taken him beyond the boundaries of their world.

It was time to get him back.

This was almost certainly a trap. But what choice did they have?

Techno glanced toward Phil, and, at his nod, they stepped forwards.

The light enveloped them, surrounding them with nauseating whirls of color and sound. They spun endlessly in a world of shifting green shadows, breaking apart and reforming, collapsing into tiny starbursts of white and fading away once more. Techno could barely see beyond the swirling colors, could barely hear past the hollow screams, and then the world went suddenly silent and he braced for impact-

His feet were on solid ground. Immediately, he shifted his stance, awaiting an explosion, a shower of potions, or whatever Dream’s twisted mind could have prepared for their arrival.

Nothing came.

He blinked, and as the green faded from his vision, he was greeted by the sight of a man.

The stranger was tall, broad, and dark-skinned. An eyepatch covered his left eye. Though he appeared to be unarmed- he could have anything stashed in his inventory- and his face was settled into a mask of calm, Techno could see anger etched into every line of his body.

A woman with dark hair stood beside him, one hand poised over a small metal device at her hip. Her brows, too, were furrowed in rage.

Arrayed behind them stood four more people; dressed in oddly colorful armor, but evidently prepared for a fight. Though clearly not... fully prepared. One of them wore nothing but iron

armor, forged in red and gold. Another carried no weapon save for a fragile-looking composite bow.

Techno huffed.

If this was all that Dream had, then things would be a lot easier than he had expected.

Wade Wilson was hearing voices.

That in itself was nothing new. Madness and immortality had always walked hand in hand, after all. What was strange about this one, was that he was fairly sure, for once, that it was real.

After his affair with the God of Death, he had begun hearing that soft voice in his mind whenever the god wanted to speak to him. Wade had never exactly chosen to become an Angel of Death. And yet...

But this- this wasn't him. This was something- or rather someone- else. He was certain, however, that this was a death god. One not from his world, however. He wondered briefly how she'd gotten in his head, but he didn't care enough to actually think about it.

The problem was that she just wouldn't shut up about her son being kidnapped despite it being none of Wade's business. His head was still throbbing from the bullet lodged in his brain and wanted no involvement in whatever fight she had chosen a side in so he'd simply had decided to ignore her.

She started shouting again making his headache worse. He had no way of getting the bullet out, and that made the healing process much slower and more painful.

He had known it wouldn't really kill him. It hadn't stopped him from trying again that night.

Now, he regretted it.

"They took him!" Her voice raged in his head, "My baby! They stole him!" Beneath the wrath, there was a note of real fear. "He's going to kill him!"

Wade's skull ached, and he finally cracked, acknowledging her presence for the first time. "Not my problem, Lady! I don't care!"

"You have to save him!"

He sighed to himself. She had insisted that he help her child over and over again, roaring her pleas into his mind. It was doing nothing to help his head. "Why should I?"

"If you don't, I'll kill you." Her tone was deadly serious, and Wade couldn't help but laugh, making the bullet rattled loudly around his skull.

“If you can, you’re more than welcome to try!”

“Then I will kill those close to you.”

Passing a hand over his tired eyes, Wade leaned against the wall. “Stop with the threats, Lady. They ain’t working. You have no power, not here, and there’s no one around me to kill.”

At that, the goddess fell silent. Wade felt his shoulders slump in relief. Finally, some peace.

“This is true.” She acknowledged, quietly. “But I can talk to you.”

“And?”

“And,” She continued, and a hint of cruel relish blossomed in her voice, “I won’t stop.”

Oh fuck. Wade’s eyes flew open in horror.

“*Ever.*”

With a pained sigh, Wade heaved himself up from the floor and looked around. The rust-streaked walls of the building where he had spent the night were unchanged, save the gruesome splatter of red, painted over the concrete behind him. He left the pistol on the floor where he had first dropped it; the magazine was empty, and the gun itself was already badly damaged. His mask now had a gaping hole at the back, but he pulled it on regardless. It didn’t bother him much.

“Alright, Lady Death, you win.” With mounting dread, Wade wondered exactly what he was getting himself into. “What do you want me to do?”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

In loving memory of Technoblade.

A beloved member of our community and an inspiration to us all.

Our hearts go out to his friends and family.

Thank you, Techno, for everything you have done for us.

This story is for you, and for everyone else reading and enjoying.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“*Tommy* ! Tommy, wake up!”

Someone was shaking his shoulder roughly. Tommy frowned drowsily- Phil was usually much more gentle about waking him up in the morning. What was the rush?

“Five more minutes,” He murmured, eyes still closed. The response was immediate. “We don’t have five minutes, Tommy! Get up! We need to go, *now* !”

“Wha...?” He reached for the blankets, trying to pull them up and over his head, but couldn’t find them. That was unusual. And, as he gradually came back to his senses, he became aware of how very hard and cold his bed was. Had he fallen asleep on the floor? Was that why Phil sounded so panicked?

“Tommy, I swear to Prime, if you don’t get up *right now* I’m leaving you here!”

Prime , Tommy thought sleepily. *Phil’s being a really whiny bitch this morning* .

And then he shot bolt upright, eyes flying open and heart suddenly pounding. *Because that wasn't Phil's voice.*

His vision blurred as the blood rushed to his head, making it near-impossible to make out his surroundings. He caught smudged glimpses of rough concrete walls, of figures grappling with each other, and then of a pale face half-hidden behind dark lenses atop a light blue shirt. Weird, green-tinted light spilled out from behind him, rippling eerily over the walls and floor.

Why is George here? Where even is here? What's happening? What is this place? How-

The memories struck him like a thunderbolt; torchlight flickering over the shadowy walls of his mining tunnels; Dream behind him, rising from the gloom like some horrifying spirit; fists crashing against his face, his ribs, even as he threw up his arms to defend himself; falling, as though in slow motion, with terror burning in his veins, and then-

Without thinking, he reached out and seized George's arm. "Where are we? What's going on?"

"No time!" George prised his arm away, bending to try to haul Tommy to his feet. "Come on, we have to go!"

Head still fuzzy, Tommy scrambled to his feet. But before he could take a single step, someone flew through the air right beside him and crashed headlong into the wall. The figure crumpled at the impact, slumping down to the concrete below. He lay still, the enchantments on his netherite armor flickering weakly.

"*Sam ?*" Heedless of George, Tommy spun towards the unconscious form on the ground. And then the keen blade of a sword swept across his vision, and he froze as it pressed against the fragile skin of his throat.

"Don't move, Tommy."

That was Punz's calm voice. Heart racing, Tommy turned his head to see him standing there, almost casually, with blood painting his knuckles and trickling slowly from a wound on his temple. Barely meters behind him, Dream flung Sapnap- *what was he doing here?* - against a wall, only for the latter to lunge back towards him and swing a punch into his jaw. Both were shouting, their voices echoing off the walls, making such a ruckus that Tommy could hardly believe that he'd managed to sleep through it.

Punz ignored them and pressed the blade of the sword a little closer to Tommy's windpipe. "Hands where I can see them, now."

"Heeey, big man..." Slowly, Tommy raised his arms, trying to keep his breathing shallow to avoid the sharp blade. "How's it going?" He met Punz's cold gaze and did his best to smile. "We're friends, right?"

"Don't make this harder than it needs to be." The mercenary's voice was cold. "Give up, now, and it'll be over quickly."

Tommy stilled, staring at Punz. His head was swimming with exhaustion and pain. He could feel a trickle of fresh blood leaking through his hair from the blow that had knocked him unconscious. His ribs *ached* - he was not entirely certain that they had all survived the beating unbroken- and he could feel the bruises that were blossoming across his arms and legs. Every movement took so much *effort* ; his whole body was heavy and slow.

He could just... stop. Give in.

It would be so easy.

Do as he was told. Stop fighting back.

End this once and for all.

“What’s your deal, Punz?” His thoughts faded as George took a step towards the mercenary, keeping one eye on the sword held to Tommy’s throat. “I thought you were on our side?”

Punz rolled his eyes. “You picked a terrible time to start getting involved in other people’s fights, George.” With one fluid movement, he lifted the sword away from Tommy and spun with the agility of a dancer. His fist collided with George’s jaw with all the force of his momentum, and George staggered backward as his eyes rolled back in his head.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tommy spotted movement beside him. Sam, blood flowing freely from cuts across his arms and face, was awake and pushing himself back to his feet. Punz was still watching George collapse- he hadn’t yet realized what was going on.

Tommy, despite everything, grinned at the sight of the creeper hybrid pulling himself up. Of course, he wasn’t going to just give in to Dream! For better or worse, he was one stubborn bastard.

Sam’s hand landed gently on his shoulder, just as Punz finally turned back to face him. Tommy glanced up and met the mercenary’s grey gaze with eyes that he knew burned with defiance. For a moment, he enjoyed the burst of satisfaction at the sight of Punz’s frustrated glare, right before the mercenary raised his bloodstained sword.

And so as Sam shoved him backward and lunged for Punz, Tommy ignored the pain and exhaustion that weighed down his limbs and ran. He didn’t look back.

He didn’t know where he was going, or where he would end up. The strange city streets swallowed him in seconds, unfamiliar and cold and dark.

But he did know that he was leaving Dream behind him.

And he knew that he was running for his life.

There was something strange in the air tonight.

Matt couldn't tell precisely what it was. It was just a feeling, carried on the wind, snaking its way through the city streets. It was the sense that something had... awoken. As though ancient forces were stirring, preparing to once again walk the paths of this world.

Hell's Kitchen was restless tonight. Fortunately, the big fish were laying low, for once. He wondered if they, too, had sensed trouble ahead, and decided that their plans could wait for a few days. Only the petty criminals, apparently, had missed the memo.

Matt dealt with them swiftly and took to the roofs, climbing the skyscrapers until he could look out across the entire city- in a sense. He could imagine just how beautiful it was at night; strung with glowing specks of light, like a reflection of the stars above. From up here, it was easy to forget the true nature of the city; a hive of bitter minds in constant turmoil, biting and snapping and snarling at one another.

Perched quietly on the edge of the rooftop, Matt listened, thought, and eventually decided to call it a night. But before he could move to stand up, he heard it.

"Now, where to?" The sound of a quiet sigh drifted through the air. "I can't see anything even close to what you're describing."

Not thirty feet away, Deadpool was crouched calmly on the edge of another rooftop, chatting softly to himself. At least Matt assumed it was to himself- he wasn't aware of anybody else out there, nor any kind of device.

"No, I can't just search the whole city!" There was a tinge of frustration in Deadpool's voice now. "I know I *technically* don't need to sleep, but it's still one of my favorite hobbies!"

Silently, Matt moved. He slipped through the shadows, crossing the space between them in a matter of seconds, and approached the mad mercenary without a sound.

“I thought I told you to never come back here.” Though he was now directly behind Deadpool, the mercenary didn’t even flinch. “Oh, hey Diddy. Fancy seeing you here.”

Matt scowled and opened his mouth to retort, but before he could say a word, Deadpool interrupted. “Don’t suppose you’ve seen a big black rectangular thingy recently? Should be hard to miss, *apparently* - it glows bright green and screams like hell.”

“What?” Matt hesitated, thrown off track. “What are you talking about?”

The mercenary shrugged. “Eh, worth a shot, I guess.” His casual reply flicked to a sharp whisper, though this was clearly not directed at Matt; “Yes, I *know* he’s blind. Trust me, that wouldn’t have stopped him from finding it.”

“I thought I made it clear last time.” Matt interrupted the hasty whisper, as though he hadn’t heard it at all. “Your kind of work is forbidden in Hell’s Kitchen.” He ran a tired hand over his face. “I don’t care who the target is- I’m not letting you kill them. If whatever they’ve done is illegal, I’ll help you bring them down the *right* way.”

“Oh, don’t get your panties in a twist, sweetheart.” Deadpool leaned back casually, resting his hands on the ground. “I’m not really here for business. Well, not *that* kind of business, at least. I’ve got a child to rescue.”

Matt snorted. “You expect me to believe that?”

Deadpool was a mercenary, and well known for it. The word on the street was that he’d agree to kill just about anybody- for the right price. And he healed at a terrifying rate; a trait which left him more or less immortal, and very, very difficult to stop. It had been a few years since Matt had first encountered him, and then beaten him senseless, before making him swear to keep his business away from Hell’s Kitchen. He still had a sneaking suspicion that Deadpool had rather enjoyed the whole process.

“What, now you can’t even trust me?” Deadpool’s voice pitched into a tremulous whine, alongside what was most likely his best attempt at puppy dog eyes. They were, of course, completely wasted on Matt, who raised his eyebrows and asked; “Do I have a reason to?”

“Alright. You can tell when someone’s lying, right?” The mercenary replied. “So, when I tell you that a death goddess is shouting at me, in my head, and telling me to find whoever kidnapped her son- you’ll know I’m telling the truth!”

“Sure. You’ve actually gone insane, and genuinely believe that you’re telling the truth.” Matt shook his head.

“ *Ugh* .” Deadpool sighed and got to his feet. “Come with me, then.”

“What?”

“Just so that you can confirm I’m not killing anyone.” He spread his hands, as though what he was saying should be obvious. “Come on! Isn’t saving helpless kids supposed to be, I don’t know, your thing? And besides, you can help me look for that weird portal thing that Kristin keeps talking about.”

“Kristin?”

“The goddess of Death,” Deadpool explained, and then, as though unable to help himself, added; “Duh.”

“Oh, of course, why did I ask?” Matt sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, resigning himself to his fate. “Alright. I’ll come. But I swear, if you are lying to me-”

“Come on! Have a little faith!” Deadpool flung his hands up in exasperation. “We should be friends! After all, I wear red spandex, you wear red spandex... We’ve gotta be there for each

other! Support each other in our questionable wardrobe choices, you know?”

Matt was already regretting his decision. “Just- just get on with it.”

“Fine, fine... The kid’s name is Theseus.”

“As in... the ancient Greek hero?”

“The what?” Deadpool furrowed his brow.

“From the ancient-” Matt broke off. “No, never mind. Please, continue.”

Deadpool shook his head. “Ok. Whatever. The guy who actually kidnapped him is called Dream, and according to Kristin, he’s pretty strong, and a damn good fighter. Thing is, he’s *also* hosting a god known as DreamXD, which makes him even more powerful than he has any right to be. So we’ve gotta look out for him, be prepared for a fight to the death, yadda yadda yadda.” He gestured wildly, almost smacking Matt in the arm. “And they all got here through this green portal thing. Kristin says that it should be around here somewhere, but...” He heaved a great sigh, feigning exhaustion. “I haven’t found it yet.”

“So how exactly are we supposed to find it?”

“Apparently, it’s screaming like hell. And I’d hoped, with your super hearing and all...”

Matt gave him a long, hard stare, waiting patiently for Deadpool to drop the act; to laugh, give him a playful nudge in the ribs, and tell him that no, it was just some weird joke.

Only he didn’t. He stood there, in silence, head cocked expectantly.

And so Matt sighed again, stepped up to the edge of the rooftop, and concentrated. Just in case there was a chance- however slim- that Deadpool wasn't crazy. Just in case there really was a child, trapped and scared and alone, with nobody but a mad mercenary and a blind vigilante to save him.

He had barely gathered his focus, though, when the deep rumble of an explosion rang out across the rooftops.

For a moment, both hesitated. And then, as one, they looked at each other.

"Was that your doing?" There was perhaps a shade too much accusation in Matt's tone. He didn't really care.

"Oh, come on! How could this possibly have been me?" Deadpool sounded almost comically affronted. But there was just enough genuine sincerity lingering in his voice that Matt chose to believe him.

Without another word, he took off, racing towards the billowing cloud of grey smoke rising sinuously into the air. Deadpool followed at once, keeping close behind him.

Together, they flew across the rooftops, leaping the gaps with practiced ease and efficiency. It wasn't long before they found the source of the commotion.

Down in the shadowy depths of a rotting side alley, a fight was raging. The stench of blood and gunpowder drifted through the stale air, although Matt had heard no gunshots. Shouts of anger and cries of pain mingled with the metallic crashing of what sounded like *swords*, punctuated by the occasional thump of fists on flesh.

Poised above the scene, Matt raised a hand, signaling to Deadpool that they needed to stop. Rushing in would be far too dangerous; especially since they had no idea which side they should be fighting for. They had to hold back, if only for a minute, and try to work out what exactly was going on.

Rapidly, he focused his senses. To his surprise, the first thing that caught his attention was not the fight itself. It was the- the *thing* - standing right beside it.

It was the thing that frayed against his mind, that tugged at the edges of his thoughts. It called him nearer, and at the same time repelled him- that held a promise of curiosity fulfilled, of secrets revealed, and yet of a vast, terrifying unknown.

It was the thing, in short, that felt just like the ethereal *otherness* of the first portal that had ever opened on Earth. It felt, somehow, *impossibly* - it felt like a tear in reality itself.

Like the first portal, it had a shape to it. This one, though, was smaller, much smaller, and strangely rectangular, as though it was man-made. The edges were rough and brittle, but sharp- obsidian, or something similar, perhaps?

He could *hear* it, too. Vague, eerie screams echoed from the rip- hollow and unnatural, and unsettlingly human.

“Is- is that...?” Matt trailed off, hesitant even to ask.

“A black, rectangular thing that glows green and screams?” Deadpool’s reply was unmistakable smug. “Yes. That’s the portal that we’re looking for.”

Matt nodded briefly, ignoring the sass- they had no time to waste with petty bickering. Pressing his palms flat against the edge of the rooftop, he shifted his attention back to the fight, straining his senses to work out what was happening.

The clamor of the fight filled his ears, muddled and confusing, but that was the way it always was. He was long past the time when he had allowed the chaos to stop him.

And so he *listened* , listened past the crash of swords, past the screams and shouts, past the sounds of punches and kicks. He listened until he could distinguish voices, until he could identify distinct footsteps. He listened until he could hear the wild pounding of heartbeats,

and exhausted, rapid breathing. He listened until he could tell apart the people below, could identify their weaponry, and could visualize how they fought.

His hands, flat against the rooftop, were equally aware; picking up the vibrations and tremors that ran their way up the walls. Imperceptible- unless you knew what you were looking for. And Matt had learned, over years of training, exactly what to look for. He could sense the shifting of the fight, the way it lurched back and forth, up and down the alleyway. The shapes of rubbish bins and old crates blocking the walls became apparent and then defined.

The scent of blood drifted through the air- only he was certain that it was... different. Or, at the very least, some of it was not human. It was pungent, less metallic, less cloying; almost like tree sap or broken leaves, as though chlorophyll ran through their veins instead of blood.

The pieces fell into place in his mind, rapidly forming the image of the fight below. Four people- four *beings*- were locked in combat. They were clearly allied: two of them had their backs to the portals, though they didn't appear to be guarding it. On the contrary, they were attempting to move away from it, down the alley and out into the streets beyond.

The other two were standing in their path, and these two were, quite distinctly, not human. The first was spinning a trident in one of what Matt was sure were four arms. Though the other was humanoid, his hands radiated a heat that would have killed an ordinary person, as though his arms were enveloped in flames.

To his surprise, the humans seemed to have the upper hand. Though the fight shifted this way and that, the mutants were being steadily forced back. They had already lost ground, and fought on the defensive, while the humans pushed forwards.

And a fifth being, probably human, lay unnoticed on the ground beside the portal. He was very still- unconscious, or too injured to continue the fight- but his breathing was steady. Was this the child that they were rescuing? If so, he was much older than Matt had been expecting.

All five wore some kind of full body armor, forged from a material that he didn't recognize. And there was something surrounding it, some bizarre aura, that- strengthened it? Made it more resistant? He couldn't tell. But it seemed to be absorbing most of the punches and

sword strikes; that explained how the fighters were still standing. At the same time, it grated on his senses, in much the same way that the portal had, with that sense of eerie *otherness* .

But why would the child- if that *was* the child- be wearing armor? He wouldn't be, surely. And if that wasn't him, then where was he? And why were his kidnappers fighting amongst themselves?

Barely three seconds after he knelt down, Matt stood back up, brow furrowed. He turned to Deadpool, mind full of questions, but before he could say a word, the mercenary spoke.

“Which one?”

Deadpool's voice was sharp and abrupt, and Matt realized instantly that the question was not directed toward him. He held his tongue as Deadpool's brow furrowed. A moment later, his vision cleared. “The one with the smiling mask?”

Matt sensed the mercenary turn towards him and gave him a brief nod to indicate that he had heard what he had said. But before he could open his mouth to suggest a plan, Deadpool interrupted: “Cool! Alright, I'm gonna go beat him up.” And, without a moment's hesitation, he sprang lightly from the rooftop, plummeting towards the fight raging below.

Too late, Matt shouted after him. “Deadpool, wait-”

“No killing, I know!” The mercenary's voice echoed off the walls of the alley as he fell.

Matt cursed under his breath as he followed. The wind whistled in his ears as he dropped, and then he hit the ground even more weightlessly than Deadpool had. In the space of a heartbeat, he rose to his feet, settling effortlessly into a battle stance.

The sound of the fight stopped instantly. Matt felt four pairs of eyes flick over them; judging, calculating, trying to determine which side the newcomers would fight for- if they were prepared to fight at all.

In turn, he took advantage of the momentary hesitation to study his opponents more closely. He was still certain that the two behind him were both human, but now that he was closer, it was clear that something was... off.

Though their hearts both thrummed with exertion, one of them, standing closest to Deadpool, did not even sound out of breath. In fact, his breathing was regular and even, as calm as though he had spent the last hour sitting peacefully in a comfortable armchair. Matt frowned as unease trickled down his spine.

He had no time to dwell on it. One of the mutants, the humanoid with the flaming fists, took a step toward them. "Who-" He called, between gasps of air, "the *hell* ... are you?"

"Lady Death sends her regards," Deadpool replied, calmly, in lieu of an answer. Matt didn't miss the way that some of the tension drained from the shoulders of the fire mutant, and the one with four arms let out a faint sigh of relief. Raising his voice, Deadpool continued. "Now, where is Theseus?"

A mad cackle cut through the air like the crack of a whip. Matt spun around, arms raised defensively, and was unsurprised to be met with the strange, unnatural human, who laughed the way that a hyena would when faced with a dying lioness. Briefly, the awful noise ceased, and the man leaned forwards. "Did you say... *Theseus* ?"

Slowly, a malicious, gleeful grin curled onto his lips. "So. Kristin did manage to reach you." He shook his head. "Oh, poor, helpless goddess. Did she have to *beg* you for help? Did she?"

With obscene eagerness, he grinned. "Well then, *Lady Death* . You're too late." His chuckle was cutting, and utterly devoid of mirth. "He's already dead."

Beside Matt, Deadpool flinched as though hit by an electric shock. His whole body stiffened, and then his legs seemed to give out. He dropped to his knees, hands pressed to his ears, eyes shut tight as if somebody that only he could hear was screaming in agony. Faintly, so quietly that nobody else could possibly have heard it, Matt caught the mercenary's whisper. "*I'm so sorry.* "

The near-silent apology seemed to snap Matt out of his shock. Fury, burning bright and razor-sharp, surged through his veins, and he spun back to face the man who now laughed hysterically at the sight of Deadpool on the ground.

This, then, had to be... Dream. The man that the mercenary had told him about, the man who was hosting a god, the one with the "smiling mask". Matt wished, suddenly, that he had paid more attention when Deadpool had described him. If he was truly hosting a god, though, then it might explain the bizarre *normality* of his breathing. And how he had been able to hold his own with ease against a man who carried fire in his hands.

Behind him, Deadpool cried out in pain. Footsteps sounded, and then another voice called out. "He's not dead! Dream's lying, I swear!"

Matt didn't have to turn around. The man with four arms had approached the stricken mercenary and seized his shoulder to hold him upright as the tension vanished from his body. The mutant raised his head until Matt could tell that he was staring straight at the blank eyes of Dream's mask. "He's alive. I saw him- he ran as soon as he got the chance. I don't- I didn't see which way he went. But I promise, I *promise* you, I'll find him."

"Then the hunt is on!" Dream kept laughing, even as he shouted the challenge. "And he won't be alive for long once I get to him." His grin stretched wide, far too wide. "If you're lucky, Kristin, I'll leave you enough of the pieces to rebuild some *semblance* of his body in your afterlife." With a growl of fury, Deadpool sprang to his feet. This time, Matt made no move to stop the mercenary as he lunged for Dream's throat. The collision was forceful enough to send them both, mercenary and madman, sprawling gracelessly across the dirty ground.

Matt sensed the other human, Dream's accomplice, turn towards the newborn fight. But before he could move to intervene, something flew past Matt's head with an eerie, near-silent whistle. Matt heard the nasty *crunch* of collapsing metal, the ugly *squish* of a blade meeting flesh.

The four-armed mutant had taken advantage of the human's momentary distraction. His trident- thrown with deadly accuracy- had found its mark, and, with a faint clatter, the other human collapsed. Matt's stomach lurched, but to his relief, he could still hear a fluttering

heartbeat behind the cold spears of the weapon. He was wounded, badly wounded, but not yet dead. And now, with this additional threat dealt with, they outnumbered Dream four to one.

And so as Deadpool reared back, fists raised, prepared to deliver a furious blow, Matt led the two mutants into the battle.

It didn't take long for Matt to begin to understand what Deadpool had meant.

The fight should have been easy.

Four of them- each with abilities that most people could only dream of- against one apparent human.

Only it *wasn't* .

From what Matt could tell, their opponent *moved* like an ordinary human; faster, stronger and more agile than most, yes, but nothing that suggested any unusual powers or capabilities.

And yet Matt had not managed to land a single hit on him. Neither, he was sure, had any of his allies.

It was like trying to fight a cloud of smoke. Matt would strike out at Dream's head, or his throat, aiming for the weaknesses in that impenetrable armor, and be met only by empty air.

Every attack would miss by a heartbeat, or glance harmlessly off his shield. Even Deadpool's first furious punch had somehow not connected, though Dream had been lying still on the ground. Matt had heard the mercenary's fist hit the concrete with enough force to break knuckles, and then Dream had been back on his feet and lunging towards them.

And somehow, while their swords and fists had done no more damage to him than a feather might have done, Dream's attacks landed true each and every time.

He kept changing weapons, too- swapping effortlessly between a gleaming longsword and a huge battleaxe. Matt couldn't tell where they were stored; it sounded as though they were simply being pulled from thin air. It had shocked him to the core when first Dream, and then the man with four arms, had pulled off the trick; one weapon vanishing without a trace before another emerged from nowhere.

At the very least, it seemed to be an ability possessed by anyone who had come from their world. Only it was clear that Dream was far more proficient at it than the other two; he traded weaponry with ease, starting a great swing with the battleaxe only to finish deftly with a neat sword thrust. The mutants switched their blades too, but more slowly, and once or twice it was clear that they had not withdrawn the weapon that they had wanted.

And Dream just kept on fighting, landing blow after blow. It was as though the odds themselves were bending to his will.

Matt now bore a nasty gash across his cheek, alongside bruises and cuts across his arms and torso. His limbs were starting to feel alarmingly heavy, as though he had been fighting for hours rather than minutes. His allies were in a similar state; the fire mutant was bleeding from a great sword slash across his chest, and his companion had at least three broken fingers on one of his four arms. Deadpool, of course, had no visible injuries, but even his breathing was growing ragged.

And while their attention had been focused on Dream, his accomplice had not been idle. Matt had been helpless to stop him as the human had yanked the trident from his side, before pulling what sounded like a small jar or bottle from nowhere. Some strange liquid splashed around inside it, and the human drank it down without hesitation.

And then- impossibly- the human moved to stand up. Matt could barely believe it; barely minutes before, he had been bleeding out from at least three stab wounds. But, with a groan, the man rose to his feet and drew a bloodstained axe.

The mutant with four arms shouted a warning as the human lunged. Matt ran to help and met him head-on.

The human was clearly less skilled- or perhaps less lucky- than his masked accomplice. But he held his own unwaveringly, even against two equally matched opponents. He used his fists as confidently as his axe, and the mutant was hard-pressed to defend himself, despite his additional set of arms.

Matt grunted in pain as the blade of the axe grazed his side, slicing clean through the reinforced suit. His eyes widened with shock as he pressed a hand to the wound; the material of the suit was designed to deflect *bullets*. What on earth were these weapons made from? The same strange substance that made the armor practically impenetrable?

The axe swung to meet him, and Matt dived beneath it, rolling to a stop and springing back to his feet. He threw a punch towards the side of the man's head but was met only with the damned material of his helmet. He spun away as the man reversed the axe, bringing the handle down like a club.

This was hopeless. They were fighting back and forth, with neither side able to gain ground, but they couldn't possibly keep it up for much longer. And while Dream was uninjured, and his accomplice barely bleeding, Matt and his allies were being worn down. They needed a new plan, and fast.

He had just reached this conclusion when a loud hiss sounded in his ear, accompanied by the sharp stench of gunpowder.

Matt froze, disoriented by the echoes of the hiss rebounding from every wall. The smell filled his nose, chokingly strong. Before he could react, and regather his scattered senses, the world seemed to shatter around him.

With a deafening boom, the explosion picked him up like a ragdoll and hurled him against the wall. For a moment, fire whirled around him, blisteringly hot, and then it was gone, and Matt fell to the ground.

Everything seemed to be moving very slowly.

Matt's face was pressed against the concrete. He could feel the rubble and chips of rock, rough and jagged against his skin.

His head was spinning.

And he couldn't hear anything.

For a panic-stricken moment, he felt as though he was in free-fall. His ears strained desperately for something, anything, some faint sound to reassure him that it was not over, that the world around him had not vanished once again. Terror flooded through him, rushing through his veins, and he tried to turn over, to rise to his feet.

Suddenly, there were hands on him, holding his shoulders and wrapped around his upper arms. Matt flinched, tried to tear away, to struggle free. He lashed out with his fists, only to be caught by another strong, calloused hand, and he realized with a jolt exactly who had hold of him.

He stopped resisting and allowed the four-armed mutant to pull him up. Matt could tell by the vibration that the man was shouting, but could not hear the words, and another wave of fear gripped him. The smell of gunpowder still hung in the air, overwhelming, making him feel nauseous and dizzy. He fought to draw breath, but his chest felt painfully constricted, and his throat was too tight to make a sound.

Heart pounding, Matt gasped for air and was met with the rim of a cool glass bottle pressed to his lips. A strange, syrupy taste, almost reminiscent of melons, filled his mouth, and he was forced to swallow before he choked.

Almost immediately, energy rushed through his limbs. He knocked the bottle aside and *breathed*, greedily inhaling the dusty air, clearing the lingering stink of gunpowder from his head. The sound of the glass shattering against the concrete met his ears, and he thought that he had never heard a more beautiful sound, simply because he could hear it at all. Slowly,

surely, his hearing repaired itself, and he could feel the world around him coming back into focus.

The wound on his side ached suddenly, and he pressed a hand to it, only to find the skin rapidly reknitting itself, stemming the flow of blood. All across his arms, bruises faded away while cuts drew closed, leaving nothing more than faint scars where they had been.

By the time the taste of melon had faded, there was not a single injury left on his skin.

"What-" He broke into a brief cough, and then continued, his voice gruff. "What *was* that?"

"You don't know-?" A voice, gentler than he had been expecting, and tinged with surprise, answered. "No, of course. It was a health pot. A potion. It heals your wounds."

"A *potion* ? Like... a magic potion? Or like a video game?"

"I... I suppose?" The man sounded a little uncertain. Matt couldn't exactly refute his words, though- the potion, whatever it was, had worked, after all.

"Well, thank you, um..."

"I'm Sam."

"I'm... They call me Daredevil." The man, Sam, said nothing. Matt assumed that he had nodded.

"Are you alright?" There was a hint of guilt in Sam's voice.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm sorry about... you know."

"No, I should be sorry. I just- I hadn't realized that you were blind."

Matt's stomach lurched, and his hands shot to his face, seeking his-

His mask wasn't there.

Before he could say a word, Sam caught his wrist and pressed a wad of fabric into his palm. "It's here. I picked it up."

Gratefully, Matt pulled the mask back over his face. There was no time to worry about his accidental identity reveal now; it could wait until the fight was over.

To Matt's disappointment, though the explosion had left the human accomplice lying prone on the ground, it had done little to stop Dream himself.

Deadpool and the fire mutant had kept him at bay while Matt had recovered, but the battle was far from over.

Even as Matt listened, he heard the sickening sound of a razor-sharp sword being plunged deep into Deadpool's back. The mercenary grunted, but twisted away, yanking the blade out of Dream's grasp. Holding his breath, Deadpool reached behind him and dragged the sword out by the hilt. With a faint *swish*, he swung it through the air, before raising it high and plunging back into the fight.

Unfazed, Dream summoned his axe, and the weapons met in the middle with a screeching *crash*.

They were back where they had started, Matt thought. Though his own injuries were now healed, Dream remained as untouchable as ever. And prolonging the fight would only

increase the chances of one of them ending up dead.

But what choice did they have? The longer they could hold Dream back, the more time the child would have to flee. And perhaps, this time, one of them would get lucky.

Either way, giving up the battle was not an option.

Fresh resolve sparked through Matt's veins. As the fire mutant ignited his hands, attacking Dream with bursts of flame, he dived towards Dream's other side, ready to wrest the axe from his grip.

But as their foe blurred out of their reach, a new sound began to echo through the alley. Though at first faint, it grew rapidly louder and louder, until Matt was forced to fall back.

This sound, at least, was more familiar than the hissing of gunpowder and clash of swords.

The painful booming of helicopter blades slashed through the air, far too close to the buildings to be a commercial craft.

To his left, Matt heard Sam gasp. "Shit," the mutant muttered, as the scent of gunsmoke wafted around him. "What the hell *is* that?"

The huge helicarrier hovered overhead, driving swirling winds in every direction. The harsh thunder of the blades accompanied the miniature hurricanes beating on the people below, sending dust and scraps of rubbish flying back and forth through the air.

Deadpool, too, had pulled away from the fight. "Fuck!" He cursed, shouting over the tumult of the engines. "What is SHIELD doing here?"

Another smaller explosion rang through the air, sounding out from somewhere behind them. Matt turned around immediately, seeking the source. To his surprise, it seemed to have come

from the portal; he could sense the frame, solid and intact. But the portal itself- the ethereal *otherness* that spoke of danger and promises and secrets unfolded- was gone. Vanished, as suddenly and unexpectedly as it had appeared.

And gone with it, Matt realized with horror, was Dream and his human accomplice. Whilst he had been distracted by the portal, and his allies with the helicarrier, Dream must have seized his chance to escape- and managed to take his unconscious ally with him.

How the pair had made it out of the alleyway with Deadpool and the fire mutant blocking it was a mystery to Matt. It didn't matter either way.

They were gone.

"Dream?" Matt recognized the furious voice of the fire mutant, who had evidently seen the absence of their foe. There was a quiet *whoosh* as his fists caught fire once again. "Sam! *Sam*! Come on, he's gone!" Footsteps rang out as the man gave chase.

But Sam, to Matt's surprise, did not move to follow his friend. Instead, he hesitated and glanced back towards the portal, where- Matt suddenly remembered- another person lay unconscious. The fifth person that he had heard while perched on the rooftop, whom he had mistaken for the stolen child, but who, now that he could focus properly, was clearly much older. Sam held still for a moment longer, clearly torn between two choices, and then came to an abrupt decision.

"Sapnap!" He shouted, turning on his heel and striding back towards the portal. "Wait! We can't leave George behind!" Kneeling beside his friend, he pulled out another of those strange, shimmering vials- health potions, he had called them- and raised his head to help him swallow the liquid inside.

To Matt's relief, the sound of the helicarrier cut out as the craft landed precariously on one of the rooftops. The doors eased open, revealing at least twenty people within, though Matt couldn't tell if they were armed. They leaped out of the carrier at once, and took up their positions, lining the edge of the rooftop.

Meanwhile, the SHIELD ground troops poured into the alleyway, rifles raised. Within moments, they were surrounded. Shouted instructions to *drop their weapons, get to their knees, and place their hands behind their heads* , echoed off the walls.

Matt hurried back to Sam, very aware that the four-armed giant had raised his trident. He reached out to grab one of his other arms, trying to hold him back. The last thing that they needed right now was SHIELD identifying them as threats to be subdued.

"It's alright," He muttered, as rapidly as he could. "It's okay, Sam. These are the good guys. If we don't provoke them, they're not going to shoot us- just do as they say."

Silence followed. Though Matt couldn't tell what the man's face looked like- he hadn't had the chance to find out- he could imagine his features furrowed critically, judging how trustworthy he truly was. Eventually, to his relief, he heard a whispered " *Alright* ."

The trident disappeared as both Matt and Sam sank to their knees. Sam still held his ally, George, in two of his arms.

The fire mutant- Sappnap?- had clearly escaped, still chasing down Dream and his accomplice. Matt turned his head, trying to seek out Deadpool, to ensure that he didn't do anything too stupid, but his traces were lost amidst the chaos. Well, it would probably be better for all of them if he had indeed fled; Matt knew full well that the mercenary was not exactly on good terms with Nick Fury.

And, speak of the devil, the familiar heavy footsteps of SHIELD's commander sounded out against the concrete. Matt could hear Sam shift uncertainly beside him, and guessed that Fury was at his most threatening; hands behind his back, the thunderous expression on his face.

"Daredevil. Care to explain *exactly* what is going on here?" Fury asked. Though his voice was veneered with a layer of calm, Matt could hear the anger beneath. "Are you trying to blow up the whole damn city?"

"Sir," He replied quickly. "A boy has been kidnapped. Deadpool approached me earlier, asking for my help. He wanted to rescue the child."

"And the people behind you?"

"They're on our side. They came here to try and rescue the child, the same way that we did." Matt raised his head until he would have been staring into the commander's eyes. "The kidnapper himself escaped. He wears a mask with a smiling face drawn on it. But I promise you, these people here tried to help us."

There was a faint rustle as Fury shook his head. "And did you?"

"Sorry, sir?"

"Did you save the kid?"

"I... No, sir." Matt replied awkwardly. "By the time we got here, the boy had escaped."

"But you're certain that there really was a child in need of rescuing? Not just the ramblings of a lunatic?"

"I... Sir..."

"He's telling the truth." For the first time, Sam spoke up. His voice was reassuringly calm. "The child ran away as soon as the weakness potion wore off. When Dream tried to go after him, Sapnap and I intercepted him. We tried to give the boy time to get away."

"And who exactly are you?" Fury directed the question towards Sam, now. "Are you X-men?"

"I'm not sure what you're referring to..." Sam replied slowly. "We arrived in this world less than an hour ago, chasing Dream."

So. They really had come from another reality. Matt turned his attention back towards the obsidian frame, half-concealed at the back of the alleyway, though what he was now sure had been a tear in reality itself was no longer there. But he was certain. It had truly been a portal-one that could be crossed, no less. And these people really were offworlders.

"You're going to have to come with us." Fury said sternly.

"We can't." Sam protested immediately. "We have to find our ally and continue hunting Dream." There was a hint of desperation in his voice now. "We have to stop him before he can find To-"

"That was not a request, gentlemen." Fury interrupted him. "I was just informing you of what is about to happen."

"Sir, I don't think-"

"This is too big for you, Daredevil." Fury cut him off, too. "Go home. Let us handle this."

"Sir!" Matt tried to argue, to make him see sense, but the sound of Fury's boots on the ground told him that the commander had turned his back on him. The conversation was over.

"Agent Hill. Escort our new friends to the helicarrier." Fury ordered.

A new set of footsteps appeared, ones that could only belong to the small, strong form of Fury's right-hand woman. "Yes, sir."

"We're blocking off the entire area. Not a word to the media," He continued, to the sound of general assent from the officers behind him.

"Daredevil?" The whisper came from Sam, still kneeling beside him on the ground.

Hill was approaching them. Matt could feel the way that Sam had grown tense, already preparing to fight his way out. Hastily, he reached out to lay a reassuring hand on Sam's shoulder. They couldn't risk making SHIELD their enemy.

Reluctantly, at Hill's command, Sam got to his feet. A team of medics lifted George from his arms and laid him on a stretcher. Together, they moved away, up the steps of a fire escape towards the helicarrier waiting above.

Within minutes, the blades of the helicarrier began to whirl once again. The craft lifted from the roof, shaking dust from every crack in the wall. Matt could imagine it fading from view, each surface panel fading to blue and white, blending in with the sky. Though he could still pinpoint it perfectly, to anyone watching from below, it was gone.

His new allies were gone.

Matt barely noticed the ground troops moving in around him, beginning to evacuate the scene. He had to be asked three times to leave before he finally took notice of the command.

But, with gritted teeth, he took to the rooftops.

It was time for him to head home.

Tommy was pissed off.

Yes, he had escaped Dream, once again. Yes, he was free.

But, of course, he had to be free on the streets of some brand new, weird-ass server, with no way to get home. And, even worse, this server just *had* to be set to hardcore mode.

He hated it. His regen was low, he was starving, exhausted, aching from head to foot, and totally lost. All he wanted to do was stop, hide away in a corner, and *rest* .

Only, he couldn't afford to stop. Not yet. Not until he was certain that stupid Dream wasn't on his tail. He had to be sure that he wouldn't be caught.

And so, of *course* , he just had to keep moving.

As he walked, he stared around at his surroundings. The landscape was totally unfamiliar; grey on grey built almost entirely of stone and plain concrete. The paths were grey too, at least at the edges- in the middle, they were rough and black and marked with long yellow lines. And the buildings around him... It was as though every cobblestone tower he had ever built had been gathered into one place. They seemed to stretch all the way up to the build limit, similar to the towers of Las Nevadas. Only instead of pristine white marble, the buildings here were grimy and dark, and so tall that the paths below felt boxed off and claustrophobic. Scraps of litter blew here and there in the dusty breeze.

Could this be a city? Wilbur had described cities, when Tommy was smaller- places where tens, even hundreds of thousands of people lived together. This place seemed empty, on the whole, but perhaps they preferred to stay inside overnight?

His thoughts were interrupted by his stomach, which growled loudly. Damn it. He should have thought to bring some when he went mining or tried to steal some of Dream's food. Or even have kept closer to Sam and George instead of running; they might have had a plan to get away.

It was too late now.

At least he spoke the same language that the server seemed to be set to. And peaceful mode appeared to be on: though the streets were quite dark, no mobs were spawning in.

There were, however, figures lurking in side alleys. They sent shivers down Tommy's spine, and he started walking a little faster. One person, in particular, was unsettling him- he was sure that he had seen the same man a few moments ago. Was he being followed?

He did his best not to stare too obviously but kept a careful eye on the shadows to his left. One street passed, then two, and he began to wonder if he was just being paranoid, when- there it was again. The same figure silhouetted in the darkness. The same man.

Unease flooded through Tommy's veins. Had Dream caught up to him already? No, that couldn't be right- the man following him was a stranger, he was sure. Who the hell was he?

And what could he possibly want? Maybe he had decided that he, Tommy Innit, the greatest man that had ever lived, was a good target? Well, if so, Tommy would have to teach him a lesson or two.

As soon as he passed out of the man's line of sight, he darted around the corner. Hastily, he searched through his inventory for what little armor he had and pulled it on. His iron helmet and leggings were dented and scarred from creeper explosions, and even his diamond chestplate had chips on the edges. None of it was enchanted, either, but it would have to do. Tommy was easily overpowered enough on his own anyway.

Fortunately, his twin knockback sticks weren't too splintered. He grasped one in each hand, settled into his best attempt at the attack position that Phil had taught him, and waited.

In the end, he didn't have to wait long. Within a minute, the stranger slipped silently around the corner, eyes fixed on a point further down the street.

The next second, he noticed Tommy, who almost enjoyed the sudden look of comical surprise on the man's face. The stranger froze on the spot, staring at the shimmering stick being brandished in his face, and slowly raised his hands in surrender.

Neither said a word as they sized each other up.

To Tommy's faint astonishment, the man didn't look especially threatening. He carried no weapon or shield, and no strength potion or gapple. He wasn't even wearing armor! But, more than that, he didn't *look* like a mercenary or any kind of hired soldier. He was lean, even scrawny, as though he had missed too many meals. His clothes were tattered and dirty and hung misshapenly off of his frame.

Suddenly, he reminded Tommy painfully of *himself*, during the worst time of his exile. And, for some unfathomable reason, he felt a little less inclined to simply beat the man up and go on his way.

"What are you doing, man?" Tommy lowered the stick, ever so slightly, cursing his soft fucking heart. "Why are you following me?"

"I- I saw them-" The poor guy was stammering with nerves. Clearly, he hadn't expected to be caught. "The, uh- the a-aliens. W-wearing the purple armor."

"And?" Tommy frowned, a little bewildered.

"W-well..." He trailed off. For some reason, there was a note of guilt in his voice. "I- I didn't help you. And I guess... I w-wanted to make sure that you w-were alright?"

Tommy frowned. Why had this guy gone out of his way to look out for him? "Yeah," He responded, after a pause. "I'm alright."

His stomach gave a loud, pointed growl, and he added, "Mostly."

"Are you also... one of them? F-from that- that portal thing?"

After a moment of hesitation, Tommy nodded. "Yes."

"You... You can't go b-back, can you?"

"I..."

Tommy's voice faded.

The man was right.

He didn't even know where his home portal was. And even if he found it again, what was there left to go back to?

The thought hit him like a punch to the stomach.

Dream wanted him dead, and was fully prepared to hunt him down if he needed to. Tubbo had exiled him, and though they had rebuilt a fragile alliance, Tommy doubted that he was truly forgiven- his erstwhile best friend would have no desire to get involved in his mess, especially with Ranboo and his son to protect. Techno hated him after his betrayal: just one more bridge that Tommy had burned. Phil was... complicated, to say the least. And Wilbur-

He interrupted that particular train of thought before it could get any further, and felt an odd hollow open up in his chest.

There was nothing left, was there?

His eyes began to burn, and he blinked hard, forcing the tears back down. He couldn't risk showing weakness. Not here. (Not anywhere, anymore.)

Clearing his throat, he forced the words out. "I- I guess you're right, big man." His chest felt constricted, but he continued. "I don't, uh- I don't really have anywhere to go."

"Well, it's your choice," The man started awkwardly. "But, um- if you're hungry, and you need a place to stay..." He trailed off, as though it was difficult to even make the offer. "I've got some stuff, you know, that I stashed for later..."

Tommy narrowed his eyes. Was this some kind of trick? He wondered briefly if the man was working for Dream. But he quickly dismissed the idea. If he was one of Dream's allies, Tommy doubted that he would still be alive. But that didn't mean that he was trustworthy. People rarely offered free supplies without a reason.

On the other hand, he was hungry, lost, and entirely alone. Some food and shelter would be a blessing, so long as the price wasn't too high.

"Okay, big man." Carefully, he lowered his knockback sticks. "What do you want in exchange?"

Keeping one eye on the man in front of him, he opened his inventory. To his disappointment, there was nothing truly worth enough to trade. He would have to improvise. "I've got... half a stack of wood planks? *Very* high quality, definitely worth some steak. Or maybe a stack of freshly mined cobblestone?"

He pulled the cobblestone from his inventory, showing off the little block. To his surprise, the man's eyes widened with shock. Slowly, he reached out towards it. Tommy almost pulled his hand back, but the man didn't lunge forward to seize them from him. He simply let his hand hover over the block, fingers drifting through the little number 64 hovering just above.

His expression was as awestruck as though Tommy had just conjured a stack of diamonds. "I... How in the world did you *do* that?"

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "Alright then, tough customer." He rummaged in his inventory. "I'll raise you- three stacks of cobble, plus a bonus stick!" He looked up to see the man, who

was gaping in astonishment. "I'm not giving you my armor, or my discs if that's what you're after."

"N-no! I..." The man's stammer had returned. "I don't need any of your stuff- please, keep it. I- I didn't want to trade for food. I was just g-giving it to you."

"Really?" Tommy frowned, his suspicions growing. "Then- why are you helping me?"

"W- Well... I- I didn't help you earlier. E- Even though I saw you- I saw what was going on..."

Tommy couldn't help it. He laughed. "Look, big man, nobody's expecting you to jump two guys, in full enchanted *netherite* , single-handed!" He shook his head. "Especially if one of them is *Dream* , of all people!"

"I suppose..." The guy looked away. His expression was a little sheepish. "I just... I w-want to help. Now that I actually can."

And Tommy made his decision. It was impulsive, reckless, and probably incredibly unwise- but he trusted this guy. If he wanted Tommy dead, there would have been no point in waiting. And it wasn't as though he had a vast array of options.

He sheathed his knockback sticks and pulled off his helmet. "Alright, king. Lead the way."

"I'm- I'm really not a king, man. Or anything, really. I'm just... Well. My name is Josh."

"I'm Tommy. Tommy 'Big Man' Innit. It's nice to meet you, king."

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone, I hope you are all doing better! It's been a rough couple of days, but please remember to take care of yourselves and stay hydrated!

Technoblade never dies!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

With a gasp, Sapnap jerked awake. His ribs throbbed with sudden pain, and he pressed a hand to his side.

What had happened to him? He had been fighting- fighting Dream- and then, after his enemy had escaped, he had tried to chase him down. Only-

Only- what? He didn't- he *couldn't* remember. He had run, breath sawing against his broken ribs and curling through his chest like acid, and then- what? All he knew was that everything had gone dark. Had he collapsed in the street? But then how on earth had he managed to get himself here? Had Dream found him? And where- most importantly- where *was* here?

His eyes flew open.

He was lying on his back in the middle of a room. A plain beige lampshade hung from the middle of the ceiling above him, illuminating the walls with pale yellow light. The faint sound of pouring rain sounded from outside.

Gingerly, hand still wrapped across his ribs, he got to his feet, staring around.

To his surprise, he was met with the sight of an ordinary living room- revoltingly messy, true, but there was nothing *unusual* about it.

Slowly, he turned around, noting the clothes strewn across the otherwise bare floor, the old wrappers and boxes piled in the corners, the remains of what once might have been food abandoned to rot on the low table. There was a window set into one of the walls, but the heavy curtains drawn across it made it impossible to tell whether night had already fallen.

Suddenly feeling very uneasy, he glanced over his shoulder.

He was barely able to bite back his scream.

There was another person in the room with him, sitting hunch-backed on a sofa tucked against the opposite wall. The figure was sitting perfectly still; Sapnap couldn't tell if they were even breathing.

Heart hammering in his chest, he inched closer. The person was a woman, he realised. A very old woman. She, in turn, was staring straight at him, only-

He came to an abrupt halt. Her eyes were milky white, utterly blank and eerily soulless.

Fear flooded through his veins, but he fought to keep his calm. She was no more than an elderly lady, after all, despite her unearthly stare. What could she possibly do to hurt him?

With a deep breath, Sapnap cleared his throat. "Who are you?" The woman didn't respond. Narrowing his eyes, Sapnap tried again. "Where am I? Hello?"

She gave no indication of even hearing him. Nervously, he leaned nearer, waving one hand in front of her face. The woman didn't react, didn't so much as twitch. She simply sat there, motionless, staring him down with those terrifyingly blank eyes.

Was she... dead? No, she was breathing, Sapnap was sure.

What the hell was going on? What was this place? And how had he even ended up here, to begin with?

He stumbled backwards, away from her, mind whirling with questions. His ribs throbbed with pain, and he staggered, pressing one hand against the wall to steady himself.

He couldn't afford to fall apart now. *Think !*

What did he remember? *Dream's fist colliding with his chest with enough force to smash the bones. Fighting, side by side with a man whose wounds vanished as soon as they were inflicted. Tumbling through a landscape of green light, shifting and swirling around him...*

He was here. In another world.

But it still didn't explain what he was currently doing trapped in a filthy living room with an elderly lady gazing unseeingly towards him. What had happened to him? What had happened to the others?

To his right, a door suddenly opened. Sappnap flinched in shock and pressed closer to the wall, watching as a figure stepped inside. His eyes widened with horror as he took in the sight before him.

The figure seemed to be a man, but it was hard to tell beneath the mass of scar tissue that covered his body. His skin was a hundred different shades of patchy red, and great swathes of it were warped and cracked. Jagged scars lined his face and arms.

No healing potion or golden apple could repair that amount of damage, Sappnap thought. He doubted that even an enchanted gapple would have saved him. There was no way that this man could be alive.

Was this, then, what zombies looked like here? At least this one didn't appear to have been aggravated, although there was no telling how long that would last. Unless, perhaps, it was a passive mob? He didn't know.

It was holding something in its hands, though Sappnap couldn't see what. A shovel? A sword? Whatever it was looked too small to be either, but he didn't want to risk leaving it alive with a weapon in its hands.

It struck him, suddenly, just how *bizarre* the scene was. Here he stood, with an unresponsive elderly woman on one side and a strangely peaceful zombie on the other, lost somewhere in an entirely new world. For half a second, he almost doubted himself. Perhaps Dream had hit him a little too hard across the head during their fight.

But there was no reason to dwell on it, not with a potentially dangerous mob standing five feet away. As quietly as he could, Sapnap drew the sword from its sheath. No point alerting the zombie to his presence when he could simply stab it in the back.

Soft as a whisper, he stepped forwards, only to freeze when the zombie turned casually to face him.

And then- to Sapnap's utter shock- it *spoke* .

"Is that your sword?" It asked cheerfully, as a horrible grin stretched the scars across his face. "Or are you just happy to see me?"

Sapnap gaped.

Now that the zombie had turned, he could see that what it was holding was not a weapon, but a plate - topped with several steaming vegetable-stuffed rolls.

Before his bewildered stare, the zombie picked one up, took a bite, and then set both plate and roll down on the table.

Perhaps, Sapnap thought dazedly, Dream really *had* hit him too hard.

"Look," The zombie said. "I know that you're confused right now."

Sapnap raised his eyebrows; *confused* was certainly one way of putting it.

"But please," it continued. "Don't freak out *too* bad. It's just me."

It tugged something from its pocket, spread it out in his hands, and then pulled it down over his face. The patchy, burned skin disappeared beneath a pattern of red and black cloth, with two white spots for the eyes, and Sapnap gasped. "You're- that guy- that's *you* ?"

"Yeah! We're friends, remember?" The man's voice was an odd mixture of sarcasm and genuine cheer as he drew off the mask. He stooped to pick up the plate again and took another bite of the roll. "Name's Wade, by the way-" He paused to swallow. "-but most people know me as Deadpool."

"But what's going on here? Where am I? Where's Dream? How-"

"Whoa. Slow down there, buddy." The man, Wade, stepped forwards and pressed one of the rolls into his hand. "Sit there, eat your chimichanga, and then we'll talk."

"And- wait- who's the- the creepy grandma?" Too late, Sapnap realised that Wade might not be happy to hear him call her creepy or a grandma. Fortunately, he only chuckled.

"That's Al," He replied, still smiling. "She's blind. And sometimes, she sleeps like that."

His expression dimmed slightly. "Honestly, I didn't realise you'd wake up so soon. I was gonna move you to the bedroom or somewhere a bit less..." He trailed off, shrugged, and shoved the rest of the roll into his mouth.

Sapnap examined his own- what was it called? Chimi... something?- his own roll cautiously. There were no traces of poison particles around it, and no hint of harming or weakness. It smelled strange, like carrot and potato but also something else, rich aromas that he couldn't identify.

Either way, he couldn't see any familiar dangers, and he wouldn't be able to recognise unfamiliar ones. And- more importantly- he was hungry to care.

Once he felt fully justified, he took a bite.

The food was warm and greasy and crunchy, overflowing with vegetables and meat and coated with a creamy sauce. It was surprisingly delicious.

Before he knew it, Sapnap had scarfed the whole thing down. His ribs protested painfully, so he pulled a regen potion from his inventory to finish off. The faintly bitter, salty potion taste lingered on his tongue, mixing with the flavours of the roll.

"What is that, by the way?" Wade asked. "I saw a few of you lot drinking them."

"It's a- what, you guys don't have-?" Sapnap paused. Now that he thought about it, neither of the locals that he had spoken to seemed to have potions on them. Perhaps they just hadn't reached the Nether yet, as strange as it sounded.

"It's a regen pot- ah, sorry. A regeneration potion." He tucked the empty bottle back into his inventory, feeling the bones of his ribs begin to knit themselves achingly back together. "You, uh... you need some?"

The question was a little reluctant. The guy had saved his life, possibly more than once, and Sapnap definitely owed him, but he hadn't exactly stocked up on supplies before he came here- he didn't have many potions left.

"Nah. I'm good." Wade shrugged, sitting back in his chair. His head lifted with something that might have been pride. "I have an insane regeneration factor of my own." He grinned. "I'm like Wolverine!"

"Like... what?"

"You know- Wolverine? From X-men...?"

Sapnap frowned. What was he on about? Doggedly, Wade continued. "Big guy, bright yellow suit? He's got massive claws and an even bigger-" He sighed. "Never mind."

"So..." Sapnap made a valiant attempt to change the subject. "Earlier, you spoke as Lady Death? Are you an Angel of Death? Like Philza?"

Wade grimaced. "Sort of. I think. But I don't really belong to your goddess." He pressed his hand to his temple. "She still managed to get inside my head to mess with me, though."

"So- you're going to help me stop Dream?"

"Look, I honestly don't care about your resident smiley mask guy. All I agreed to do is save Theseus."

"But- but you don't understand!" Sapnap felt a flare of alarm. "I know Dream. Or I- I did. And he didn't come here for no reason. To him, this is just another place to take over! And he won't *stop*, not until he has full control. Over *everyone* ." He had to stop to take a breath and continued more calmly. "I don't know why he brought Tommy through. But that's definitely not his only intention. You *have* to help me stop him, or he'll seize control of this entire server!"

"That sounds very much like an Avengers problem." Wade waved him off dismissively.

Sapnap glowered. "You don't *understand* -"

"Do you know where Theseus is?"

With a glare, Sapnap sat forwards. "No. He ran off during the fight, I haven't seen him since." The admission was laced with a hint of guilt.

" *Fuck !*" Wade winced with pain and dropped his face into his hands, as though his head had started to ache.

Sapnap's thoughts were racing. There was no way that he could stop Dream on his own. With Bad and Ant corrupted by the Egg and left behind on their home server, all he had was George and Sam, and gods knew where they were now. If they were going to take Dream down, they needed more. They needed someone who might be able to host a god.

They needed a stubborn, irritating Angel of Death with the worst sense of humour that Sapnap had ever heard.

The only problem was convincing him to help.

And finally, Sapnap had a brainwave.

"Well," He said, slowly. "If we are going to rescue Tommy, we'll have to actually find him first. And there is someone who'll probably know *where* to find him."

Wade glanced up at him suspiciously, but Sapnap continued. "He's probably searching for him even as we speak."

"Let me guess." Wade's voice was unamused. "That someone wears a white mask with a smiley face drawn on it, and is currently trying to kill him."

"Yes." Sapnap looked him dead in the eyes. "But what other leads do you have?"

Realisation sparked in Wade's gaze, and Sapnap gained more confidence. "Face it! You're not going to find him in time, not on your own."

Wade grimaced, and Sapnap continued. " *But* , if you help me *stop* Dream, then Tommy will be safe regardless of where he is. And we can use Dream to find him. It's a win-win."

For a long, exasperated moment, Wade hesitated. And then he heaved a great sigh. "Fine!"

Sapnap couldn't resist a small smile.

With the *hiss* of firing repulsors, Tony Stark touched down to the ground. The Iron Man suit clunked softly as it hit the pavement.

Without pause, he strode forwards toward the opposite end of the alleyway. Rainwater thundered down from above, pouring down his suit in rivulets and pooling on the dirty concrete.

Scientists and technicians hurried around him in a whirl of screens and beeping devices, racing to collect as much data as they could before the portal reactivated and they were forced to clear the scene.

Tony walked straight through the chaos, making a beeline for the end of the alley.

He spotted Nick Fury standing with his back to him, feet planted stubbornly on the very edge of the "Safe Zone" drawn out by the specialists. His brow was furrowed, and he stared the gate down as though his glare alone could hold back the oncoming invasion. The rain trickling down his head didn't seem to faze him in the slightest.

With a faintly sardonic smirk, Tony dismissed the suit. It folded away rapidly, leaving nothing behind but his arc reactor, and the twin silver circlets on his wrists.

He glanced up as Falcon and Thor landed silently on either side of him. They were both evidently fully prepared for a fight: each was dressed in their armour, with their weapons within easy reach. Rainwater ran down Thor's red cloak in shimmering rivulets and sparkled along the edges of Falcon's wingsuit.

They looked a little bit silly, especially while walking next to him as Tony wore only his tattered old Black Sabbath shirt over a pair of jeans. He briefly wondered, when had that become the norm?

It didn't really matter, but it wasn't going to stop him from laughing to himself about it.

As they approached, Tony spotted Barton, who must have been one of the first to reach the scene. He, as well as agents Hill and Coulson, were standing beside Fury while a short, middle-aged woman in a lab coat gave them the briefing.

"...From what we can tell, it's gathering energy." She was saying grimly. "We suspect that, once it reaches a certain threshold of energy, the reaction will be powerful enough to trigger a reopening."

Her brow furrowed, and she gave a sigh of frustration. "The real problem is that we have no idea how it operates. It doesn't have a single interface that we can recognise, or markings to decipher. We can't even properly identify the material."

"Shame," Tony said as he reached them. "I was kind of hoping it would just have a massive switch reading *on/off*. Ah well." He tilted his head. "What's the sitrep? Where's the portal?"

"It's right in front of you." Fury said, ignoring Tony's antics. He nodded towards the shadows at the back of the alley.

Half-hidden in the darkness, the portal loomed threateningly. The surface looked rough, brittle, oddly glossy- it resembled black glass, or perhaps obsidian. It was shaped like an imperfect rectangle, one that had been built from great blocks of the stuff.

Tony raised a suspicious eyebrow. "What? This thing?" He shook his head. "Looks more like a middle grader's attempt at an art project."

Falcon tried and failed to restrain a quiet snort. Tony continued regardless. "What's it made from? Obsidian, right?"

"It's some sort of gate." A note of irritation had flared in the scientist's voice. "Similar to the Bifrost, as far as we know. But we haven't been able to locate a power source or any

interface." A gust of wind whipped through the air, showering them in a flurry of raindrops. She hung on tightly to her tiny umbrella, trying to shield her documents from the onslaught. "It looks- from what we can tell- as though it's just- magic." She said, clearly frustrated by the foreign technology's refusal to yield any answers.

"No such thing as magic." Briskly, Tony withdrew a small screen from an inner pocket. "Only science that I haven't figured out yet." He reached up to tap his earpiece. "Jarvis? I need readings of this thing."

With a faint *hiss*, the circlets on his wrists unlatched, expanding rapidly until his forearms were encased within the metal of his suit. Two drones unfolded themselves from their hidden compartments and buzzed to life, lifting themselves neatly away from his arms. They hovered in place for a moment and then sprung forwards, zooming towards the gate and looping around it- once, twice- and then began scanning it with twin small blue laser beams.

Tony nodded with satisfaction as results started pouring in, electric-blue writing scrolling over the screen in his hands. "Oh- and Jarvis? While you're at it, give me a copy of everything that SHIELD has on this thing."

The scientist frowned and held out the file of documents in her hands, but Tony just waved her off with another sardonic grin. "No worries. I'm already in your database."

"You do know that this is completely unnecessary, right?" There was distaste in Fury's voice. "We would have given you all of the information anyways."

"What, something in there that you don't want me to find? Again?" Tony's voice was teasing, though there was no real humour in it.

Despite Fury's repeated reassurances, they all knew full well that SHIELD was prone to hiding information when it suited them.

"Like, for example," He continued, keeping one eye on Fury's expression. "The two offworlders that you currently have in custody?"

Fury's lips pursed, but he remained silent as he gestured for the scientist to hand out the documents.

Tony flipped through them quickly, and paused at the glossy photographs; one of a man wearing a blue shirt and dark glasses, the other of some kind of mutant with four arms and green hair. He nodded and passed the folder across to Hawkeye.

"So far, the offworlders have refused to cooperate with us further." Coulson's jaw was set in irritation. "One of them hasn't woken up yet. And the other refuses to speak at all unless it's with Daredevil."

"Daredevil?"

"He- and Deadpool, too- were the first to make contact with the offworlders."

Then why, Tony wondered briefly, were they not being included? He filed the thought away for later; right now, they had bigger problems.

"Are any of these guys familiar to you?" Falcon was rifling through the folder, pulling out the images of the captive offworlders. He glanced towards Thor and held one up for him to see.

"Relatives, maybe?"

"No," Thor replied shortly, unfazed by the jab. "But this- this portal... I've never seen anything like it. And this armour is unlike anything made by the dwarves."

"Have we contacted London?" Hawkeye looked toward Fury. "What does Strange think about this?"

"He says that they have nothing like it in their records. The energy readings don't match any of their sources of power." The scientist replied briefly. "And Asgard were similarly baffled. All they could tell was that it probably worked on the same principles as the Bifrost." She shook her head in frustration. "No one has any information on this at all. It's a complete mystery."

"I'm guessing we don't know where it comes from?" Hawkeye's gaze was dark. "Unless we've sent someone through?"

"No. Nobody's going through until it reactivates." The scientist cleared her throat and continued her report. "Two hours ago, it began to show signs of activity. Before that, it didn't react to anything we did to it; we couldn't power it, mark it, or even break it. As far as we can tell, it's nothing more than a simple, solid frame, made from something with very similar properties to obsidian. There's nothing attached to it, no technology, no extra materials, nothing."

"So, you're saying that it can only be activated from the other side?" Tony asked.

"Perhaps. Unless we *can* activate it from here and we simply don't have the right power source..." She sighed. "We just don't know. We're hoping to get more data from this opening. If we can figure out how it operates we'll be able to close it down. Permanently this time."

"So it has been inactive since it appeared? But by the look of it, it's certainly active now." Thor frowned as he stared at the gate.

"Well, there's no way to know for sure. But it's definitely building up energy. Its power signature is fluctuating, but it's been increasing fairly steadily for the last hour. Based on our analysis of all the previous readings, the techs predict that once it reaches a certain level of power..."

"The portal's going to reopen." Stark finished, having clearly reached the same conclusion.

Agent Hill took the moment as a sign that it was time for her to take over. She folded her arms. "According to our reports, it appeared three days ago. From thin air." She ignored Stark's questioning stare. "Five individuals- we couldn't match them to any species or planet that we know of- appeared through it. From what we could tell, they ignored their surroundings for the most part and fought amongst each other."

"They all wore some kind of suit or armour. Different styles, but all made from the same substance. We found a fragment that had chipped away and been left behind. It's very similar to vibranium in resilience and strength, although it has no radiative effects. It had been forged into axes and swords as well as the armour, which the off-worlders used to fight. We haven't seen them using longer ranged weaponry yet, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they don't have it."

“But the individuals that came through last time- they weren’t hostile towards us?” Hawkeye asked.

“They were more interested in fighting each other. As soon as we got to them, they fled the scene.” Fury didn’t take his eyes off the gate as he spoke. “From what we heard, though, they were speaking English. If we can, I’d much rather this was resolved peacefully.”

And it was at that precise moment that the screech of an alarm cut through the air.

Tony held up his screen grimly, seconds before the visor of his helmet closed over his face. The energy signature had spiked once again, and the very tip of the thin blue line zig-zagging across the glass had brushed the highest section of the graph.

“That’s it. The threshold value.” He flipped the screen closed and activated his repulsors.

“The portal’s fully active.” Hill spun to face the dark frame. The purple liquid was gushing from every crack, surrounding them with clouds of billowing violet smoke. For a moment, nobody moved.

“What are you waiting for? Clear out!” Fury roared and slammed his hands together.

As if breaking from a trance, everyone rushed to obey. There was a clamour of beeps and squawks as machinery was thrust hastily into cases and devices shoved into bags. The soldiers hastened to load the equipment into the waiting trucks as the lab techs ducked beneath the security tape and vanished behind bombardment shields.

Everyone knew that guns were next-to-useless against vibranium. The military was the very last resort, instructed only to conduct an emergency evacuation of the city. If the heroes failed to restrain the invaders... they were all in much deeper trouble than anyone had anticipated.

By the time the last truck had turned the corner out of sight, a spark of light had swirled to life, right in the centre of the empty portal frame. The stuff glowed as it spread; snakelike tendrils reached out to each corner of the dark frame, spiralling weirdly as they latched on. Within seconds, a rectangle of toxic-looking, lime green light had filled the entire space. It rippled formlessly, like water caught beneath a strong breeze.

Without warning, a faint, distorted scream echoed from beyond the curtain of light. It was followed by shouts, cries, too indistinct to make out. Tony felt an icy shiver run down his spine.

Nick Fury took a firm step forward, planting himself directly before the portal. His shoulders were squared, his jaw set- though he carried no weapon, he managed to look threatening.

Hill laid one hand over the gun at her hip. Beside her, Thor readied Mjolnir, as Hawkeye fitted an arrow to his bow, and Falcon stretched his wings wide.

The light swirled faster and faster, and the blurred sound of the screams grew louder. The purple smoke thickened, billowing around them, clouding their vision, cloaking the portal in a violet mist, and with a final howl, figures finally appeared through the fractured frame.

They came through one by one, and gathered into a group in front of the heroes. Each of them wore the same dark armour as their fellows, and each bore similar weaponry, sheathed at their sides or held openly in white-knuckled hands.

At their head stood a hulking figure on par with Thor, and easily as broad. His face was hidden beneath a mask fashioned in the likeness of a boar skull, with two great tusks curving upwards from the jaws. A thick pink braid fell across one shoulder, striking against his blood-red cloak.

Beside him stood another man, slender, wiry, about a head shorter. His hair was golden and shoulder-length, and it gleamed even as the raindrops began to drip through it. On his back, he bore *wings* - huge, black wings; feathered, iridescent and rippling in the wind. One of them was threaded with a silvery substance, perfectly shaped to match the natural feathers, but clearly not organic.

To his right, a woman raised her weapon: a *trident*, of all things, crafted from some shining blue material and tipped with the same dark metal as her armour. It shimmered in the rainwater, almost as though it was alive with an electric current. Her teeth were bared in a vicious smile.

The show of strength was obvious, and effective enough to put Tony on edge. Tony was so focused on the apparent threat that he nearly missed the pair behind them, standing hand in hand- armoured and armed like their fellows, but clearly younger, less experienced. One was tall- as tall as the man with the boar mask, perhaps even taller- but stood with a hunch, head low, half-hidden behind one shadowy wing. The other was smaller than the rest and brandished an axe the size of his entire body. The two stared around, eyes wide with a mixture of wonder and uncertainty.

The offworlders paused as they stepped down from the portal frame, leaving a wide stretch of concrete between themselves and the heroes.

Both sides hesitated, taut as whipcord about to snap, braced and ready for a fight. Tony could sense the stares; tallying their numbers, assessing their weapons, estimating their strength. The tension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

In the end, Fury was the one to make the first move. Slowly, he raised his hands, palms upward, displaying his lack of a gun or sword.

“Greetings.” His voice was loud, but calm, and steady as a rock. “Do you all speak our language?”

The winged man and the man with the boar mask shared a glance- quick, very subtle, but evidently one that spoke volumes. Boar mask took a single step forward.

“Where is Theseus?” His voice was deep, clear- he appeared just as calm as Fury. Tony felt a brief flicker of relief that they could at least understand each other; unfortunately, the note of patience in the man’s tone was clearly forced, and already wearing thin. “Hand him over, *now*, and no-one needs to die.”

“I do *not*,” Fury growled, “appreciate threats.” Evidently, his mask of calm was also fading. “State the purpose of your visit, answer each of my questions clearly, and we can resolve this peacefully.”

The offworlder took another step forwards, and the two agents standing beside Fury tensed. Unlike his fellows, he carried no weapon, and Tony couldn’t see a sword at his side, or an axe across his back. But he had far too much experience to assume that the man would be open to peaceful negotiation. His partners flanked him, on the defensive and moving cautiously, but keeping close, and the woman still clutched her trident.

“Peacefully?” Boar mask tilted his head, as though the prospect amused him. His tone, however, was scathingly sharp. “You lost that chance the moment you took Dream’s side in this fight.”

Another step closer. The man was near enough now for Tony to see his eyes- shining with barely restrained rage, and crimson as fresh blood- through the hollow pits of the skull. He glared, and he almost- *almost* - flinched. “The only peacefull thing that awayts you now is Death’s embrace.”

In the moment of silence that followed his words, he withdrew three small glass vials from an inner pocket, and smashed them at his feet. Colourful fumes billowed around them, and all five *glowed* briefly, before the smoke dissipated into the rain.

Tony had perhaps one second to wonder exactly what kind of chemical was held in those little vials. His thoughts were unfortunately interrupted by the sudden and wholly unexpected appearance of a rather large axe in Boar mask’s hands.

Shock sparked through his mind. What kind of technology could have concealed it so entirely? Where had it been stored? Had some kind of magic been used? In the corner of his eye, several read-outs flickered as the sensors struggled to make sense of it.

Before him, Fury stood his ground, stubborn to the end, refusing to back away from the battle-axe that hovered two metres from his face. Hill jumped into action, drawing her gun and lunging in front of her leader, already braced for the fight. The action was futile, and they all knew it, but Tony couldn’t help a flicker of admiration for her loyalty.

To his faint relief, though, the man in the boar-skull mask didn’t seem interested in either of them.

“Leave the eyepatch alive. He’s probably the leader.” His instructions were clipped and quiet but answered immediately by the quiet scrapes of swords drawn from their sheaths, the soft clatter of shields raised to shoulder height. “You know what to do with the rest.”

Heh. It was almost cute. They really seemed to think that they could win.

As their opponents sprang fluidly into motion, as Hill and Coulson dragged Fury out of the line of fire, Tony powered his repulsors and charged, with Thor on his heels.

This battle pattern was familiar enough. Loose a few shots with the repulsor, to disorientate them, frighten them, knock them off balance and let Thor go in with Mjolnir to take out anyone still standing. This was a fight that they had fought time and again, and these opponents were more primitive than most, what with those swords and axes. Tony almost found himself smiling as he fired the repulsors, half-expecting them to back off immediately.

To his surprise, though, the man in the boar mask didn't even break his stride. The shot crackled with power as it struck the shield, but rebounded against the wood. Purple light rippled across the shield where the energy had hit, leaving it completely unscathed.

That was not part of the plan.

Tony barely had time to take a step back before the blunt end of a heavy axe crashed into his side, crumpling the metal of his suit and sending him flying into the air. The last thing that he saw was the unforgiving brick wall of the nearest building hurtling towards him, and he just had time to hope fervently that there were no security cameras around to catch the humiliating moment.

Then he hit the wall, and everything went dark.

Even before the man in the iron armour had collided with the bricks, Techno was turning to meet his next opponent, his voices screaming for blood. The man charging at him was broad and tall; probably about as strong as himself. Though he wore less armour than the one in red, his hammer was clearly capable of causing some serious damage. Techno wasn't about to underestimate him.

They met in the middle, axe crashing against hammer. Lightning sparked when metal collided with metal, striking out into the air around them. Techno felt the force of it tear through the shaft of the axe, more powerful than any channelling magic he had ever faced. Fortunately, the trident was Niki's favourite weapon, and they had fought plenty of duels over the last few months. He knew how to take a lightning strike.

His opponent recoiled, shaking blond hair away from his face. "You can withstand a strike from Mjolnir?" His eyes were round with disbelief. "Who *are* you?"

Ah. This was an old custom, one not seen on the Hypixel servers for years. Fortunately, Technoblade had learned much more than just battle strategies from his books. He stepped back, though he kept his guard well up, and briefly ducked his head. "My name is Technoblade, Protesilaus, The Blade." As he recited the monikers, he kept a watchful eye on his opponent's face, searching for any flare of recognition. "Some choose to call me the Blood God."

There it was. A flash of understanding. "I see. You, too, are a deity." His foe nodded, and then matched his own gesture of respect. "I am Thor, of Asgard, first son of Odin, God of Thunder! Our battle shall be legendary!"

So. Old traditions, but the same old pre-bedwars bluster. Techno felt almost disappointed as Thor charged, with lightning gathering once again at the head of his hammer.

Tony came to with a groan of pain. Chunks of rubble and chips of brick clattered to the ground as he hauled himself up. He'd left a rather impressive, Iron Man-shaped hole in the wall behind him. *Okay*, he thought, *note to self – don't charge in blindly when you don't know what your opponent is capable of.*

"Systems are at 70%, sir. Severe damage to the right side of the torso and helmet. Some functionality will be lost." Jarvis informed him, helpfully. "You might want to avoid another hit like that, sir."

"Might?" He asked the AI. "You sure?"

"I can run the statistics if you'd like, sir."

"Don't bother." Tony blinked the stars from his eyes and looked around.

Before him, chaos reigned. Thor was locked in battle with the man in the boar skull, axe meeting hammer, lightning sparking in every direction. Clint had disappeared, hopefully in search of a good position to provide sniper support. Fury and Hill were facing off against the two younger offworlders, though both sides were clearly hesitant to land a strike. Sam was... nowhere in sight.

Better to leave the gods to it, Tony thought and made a dash towards Fury and Hill. But before he had taken more than three steps, a dark shadow fell over him.

Adrenaline surged through his veins as he turned. Above him, two enormous black wings were silhouetted against the sky as the damned winged offworlder plummeted from the heavens, hair streaming in the wind, bow drawn taut and eyes *burning* with rage.

Like a rabbit caught in the shadow of an eagle, Tony froze, heart hammering. The first arrow left a great scar in the metal of his suit as it shot past. The shock of the impact brought him back to his senses, and he powered his repulsors, leaping up to join his enemy in the air.

Unfortunately, his opponent's aim was good- inhumanly good. Easily good enough to rival even Hawkeye. *Did he have some kind of scope on that bow?* His thoughts were cut off abruptly as he was forced to dodge arrow after arrow, twisting and turning, completely on the defensive. Another arrow streaked towards his chest- *towards his arc reactor* . On instinct, he spun around, and the barb caught him right between two of the shoulder segments. Metal crumpled with a nasty screech, and he winced. Fortunately, the arrow hadn't quite pierced through the armour, though the shaft was now wedged into the gap, making it impossible for him to straighten his arm fully.

Finally, out of the corner of his eye, Tony glimpsed a second pair of wings. One of Sam's boosters was clearly damaged; his wings were beating lopsidedly, leaving him hovering at a weird angle to compensate, and deep scratches cut through the metal of his chestplate. But when he caught Tony's gaze, his expression was grim, and no further communication was necessary. The two had worked together long enough to know their roles. They both knew the strategy.

Falcon would be the distraction, fast and agile enough to draw the fire away. While he occupied bird man's attention, Tony would ready his repulsors, and shoot their enemy out of the sky.

Wasting no time, they darted into position. As Sam swooped down into the line of fire, and birdman spun gracefully to follow him, Tony ripped the arrow from his suit. Rapidly, he instructed Jarvis to redirect all power into the central repulsor, braced for the recoil, took careful aim-

And was effectively distracted by the unexpected blaring of his proximity alarms. He glanced back just in time to see the last offworlder, the woman with the wicked grin, her pink hair slick with rainwater and her armour gleaming. She was hurling towards him, thirty feet up in the air, spinning with the force of a small typhoon, her trident grasped in one hand. Before he could react, she struck out, and the razor-sharp metal bit deep into the chestplate of his suit.

The repulsors stuttered with the weight of the collision, and then they were plummeting back to earth. Mid-air, the woman flipped them around, one hand on her trident, the other stretched out for balance, sending them hurtling down.

They hit the ground with enough force to crack the concrete. Fortunately, the suit absorbed the worst of the impact, though a deep ache spread right down the length of Tony's spine.

"Normally," he groaned, struggling to throw her off, "I wouldn't mind having a woman on top. You're not exactly my type though."

Without warning, she rose to her feet. With a sudden sense of guilty horror, Tony realised how young she looked. "Or age range! God, how old are you?"

"Old enough to kick your ass!" Her grin was all teeth as she raised her weapon.

Without hesitation, she rammed the trident down, punching through the suit and straight into his shoulder. Tony gasped as pain flared; she had aimed for the spot already weakened by birdman's arrow. A spasm shot down his right arm, and it dropped uselessly to the ground.

Hastily, he powered the repulsor in the palm of his uninjured hand, hoping to blast her away before she could do any more damage. But before he could move, thunder rumbled overhead.

Her trident rippled with energy, waves of power running up and down its surface, and her grin stretched wide. Without warning, lightning arced from the skies, straight through the shaft of the trident, racing down into the metal of his suit. Sparks flew as every wire came alive with electricity. The suit jerked with the shocks, making him thrash wildly, though the offworlder kept him pinned down.

“System overload.” Jarvis’ voice was faint and tinny in his ear. “Sh-t-t-t... ing... dow...”

The low hum of the suit faded slowly away, though stray sparks of power still cracked here and there. Tony could feel his consciousness fading with it. Dark spots bloomed across his vision as the woman yanked her trident from his shoulder. He waited, frozen, for the final blow, trapped within the confines of his dead armour. But she merely looked down at him with mild distaste, before turning her back on him. He watched her striding towards Thor, spinning her trident effortlessly in one hand until darkness overcame him.

Techno deflected another heavy hit from the hammer, very aware that the durability of his shield was growing dangerously low. He caught a glimpse of Niki, her trident bloodied and grin fierce, and fell back as she approached Thor. He would never be so selfish as to keep the best fight for himself, and besides, he needed to build his saturation back up.

Thunder crackled overhead as Niki struck out at Thor, but it quickly became apparent that the channelling effect on her trident was doing no serious damage. Evidently, Thor had not been boasting when he had proclaimed himself the god of thunder.

They traded blows, back and forth in an elaborate dance. Niki was smaller, faster, ducking and weaving to avoid the hammer and slashing out with the trident at every opportunity. Thor was bigger, slower, but his blows were much heavier- a single direct hit could finish her. Still, she had opened several deep scarlet gashes before Thor managed to slam her trident aside with a backhanded strike from his hammer and buried a fist in her stomach.

Niki gasped, and stumbled back, spinning the trident to hold him back. Techno growled, lunging back into the fight in time to shield her from the next strike.

The force of the blow cracked across his shield, splintering the weakened wood in a burst of charred splinters. Techno gritted his teeth as his shield hand throbbed with pain- he was certain that at least two fingers were broken. He doubted that he would be able to withstand another direct hit.

Biting back the ache in his hand, he switched to a two-handed sword. He had spent months training with Niki- together, he was sure that they were capable of defeating the god of

thunder. So long as he could deflect the worst blows and keep Thor in one place, she would be able to weaken him further. They both knew their tactics.

He raised his sword high, braced for a parry when half of his world disappeared into crimson and white and *agony* . He staggered backwards, reeling from shock and pain, as his mind dissolved into a whirl of panic. A wave of nausea hit him, and he raised one hand to his face to feel the shaft of an arrow, shot straight through the bone of his boar skull mask and into his own eye.

Distantly, he heard Niki scream. Blinded and sickened, he sank to his knees, feeling blood and- and other stuff- running down his cheek. Desperately, he reached into his inventory, searching through it with touch alone. Finally, his fingers brushed cool metal, and the weight of a Totem of Undying dropped into his hand.

Clenching the little statue in shaking fingers, he fought to remain conscious. Pressing the totem to his chest, he seized the shaft of the arrow in his other hand. Without thinking, barely *breathing* , he clenched his teeth together and *yanked* .

White-hot agony ripped through his brain, and he almost retched. The arrow fell from his hand with a clatter that he couldn't hear, and he fell forwards, overwhelmed by the pain.

Technoblade never dies , he thought.

Darkness filled his mind, and then the world erupted in an explosion of green and gold.

Niki screamed as Techno fell, one hand clutching the arrow jutting hideously from his eye socket. She thrust her trident into Thor's side, driving it in deeper, *deeper* , before tearing it away as the god grunted in pain. But before she could strike again, he turned on her. Lightning blasted from the hammer, catching her directly in the chest. The force of it flung her backwards, her trident flying from her hands, and she crumpled to the ground.

The impact knocked the breath from her lungs. She gasped as she struggled back to her feet, blinking stars from her eyes, aching from the blow.

Thor was striding towards Technoblade, who knelt blindly on the rain-washed concrete, one hand wrapped around a golden totem. Lightning gathered around the head of the hammer, and the god raised it high, prepared to deal the final blow, and Niki *ran* , ran like the wind, ran faster than she had ever run before, knowing that she wouldn't be fast enough.

The totem erupted in a shower of green and gold, and the hammer fell like a guillotine, and *Niki wasn't fast enough* .

But as Techno opened his one good eye, too dazed to throw himself out of the way, something whistled loudly as it shot past his head. A small projectile, hissing and steaming,

drove into Thor's chest with enough force to send him stumbling backwards. Before the god could react, it exploded with the force of a bomb, scattering colourful sparks in every direction and knocking him to the ground.

Stunned, Niki spun around. Ten feet away, Tubbo loaded another firework into his crossbow. He was grinning like a maniac as he raised it again. "Subscribe to Technoblade, motherfuckers!"

As Thor groaned in pain, Niki heard the faint sound of familiar laughter.

Technoblade was rising to his feet, sword back in his hand, chuckling at the sight before him as specks of green and gold knitted his face back together.

Ruth, the head scientist of SHIELD, fought to hang on to her notes as she joined the rush of people trying to clear the scene.

Her assistant hurried beside her, eyes glued to the screen in his hands, still scrolling with readings. The energy monitor spiked, spiked again, and Ruth realised with a shock that offworlders were actually passing through.

"This- this is unbelievable!" He muttered; clearly, he had reached the same conclusion as her. "They're not just from another world... they're *actually* from a different reality!"

Excitement flared in her mind, but for now, she quelled it. "Save it," she snapped. "We have to get out of here. There'll be plenty of time to theorise later."

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted two agents hovering idly at the edge of the scene. "You!" She called, beckoning them over. "Help me with this equipment."

"Yes ma'am!" One of them snapped to attention, though he couldn't seem to restrain the silly smile that spread across his face.

“And you-” Ruth turned to face the other and paused. Though the little punk wore his standard issue uniform jacket, it had been left open to reveal a casual white hoodie adorned with a shiny gold chain. She scowled at him. “What in god's name are you wearing? Who’s your superior?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.” The first agent spoke up, slightly sheepishly, his smile widening. “He’s new. I’ve already given him a talking to.”

Ruth pursed her lips. But it wasn’t the time to argue about it, and it was hard to stay angry with the agent’s cheerful, disarming smile.

“I assure you,” He said smoothly, pale green eyes shining brightly. “It won’t happen again.”

She sighed. “I’ll let it slide, this time.”

And with her assistant by her side, and the agents hauling the equipment, she stepped up into the army jeep. It roared to life immediately, driving them rapidly away from the battle; back across the city, towards SHIELD’s headquarters. The Triskelion awaited them.

Chapter End Notes

What did you guys think? Let us know what was your favorite part in the comments!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Alright, this chapter turned out a little longer than we were expecting... oops? Either way, we hope you enjoy it. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun had risen well over the city skyline by the time Matt stumbled back into his office. Exhausted, he sank into the nearest chair, pulled off his mask and dropped his head into his hands.

He knew full well that he could- and probably should- have been here hours ago. Fury's orders had been perfectly clear. *Go home* .

And so he had left the portal, returned to the rooftops, headed back across the city. He had been poised on his windowsill, already halfway inside, when he had frozen in place.

"We have to stop him," Sam's desperate plea had echoed in his head. *"Theseus... he ran. But I promise you, I'll find him. I'll find him."*

Only SHIELD had taken him, and his companion. And while Fury had promised to look for the child, Matt was certain that he hadn't mistaken the faintest trace of disbelief in the commander's voice. But Dream was still out there, hunting, and if SHIELD refused to trigger a proper search for Theseus...

There were only two other people still trying to protect the boy. The fire mutant, Sappnap, who had reached this world less than a few hours ago- and Deadpool, a mercenary, a murderer, whose only reason for saving Theseus was the presence of a death goddess in his mind.

So what the hell was Matt doing, slinking off back home, following SHIELD's orders? He had a child to rescue.

Hesitating only to whisper a quick prayer, he had turned on his heel and taken off into the fading night.

He had searched for hours, combing the city, ears straining for a whisper of the name *Theseus*, or Dream's mad, wheezing cackle, or the shout of the fire mutant. Faint cries and whimpers had filtered through his mind, but they belonged to adults, adults whose problems lay amongst themselves for tonight. Matt would not neglect his duty, but he knew where his priorities lay.

The real problem was that he didn't have the slightest idea of what he was truly searching for. He had never heard the child's voice, or picked up the precise vibration of his footsteps. He didn't know his age, or his size. The child might not even be human, for all he knew. After all, he was- according to Deadpool- the son of Lady Death.

And in the end, his search had come up empty handed. He hadn't even been able to pick up any trace of Dream, or his partner, and Deadpool had vanished into the night. It had taken the cold light of dawn to drive him home, with nothing to show but a pounding headache.

Matt shifted in his chair, breathing in the warm air of his office. His shoulders were stiff from exertion.

The most frustrating thing about the whole situation, he thought, wasn't even the trouble it took to find them. It was that he couldn't tell whether the offworlders were simply experts at covering their own tracks, or if SHIELD were hoping to contain the situation within layers of secrecy. The idea that the only organisation supposed to be helping them was in fact hindering his search was maddening, and more so because he couldn't do anything about it.

He sighed, and stood up. His ordinary clothes were bundled into one of his drawers, and he changed as fast as he could, before leaving his vigilante gear in their place. His head ached, but he ignored it, and made his way across the room towards the doorway. He opened it silently and ducked quietly into the living room beyond.

“ *Matt.* ”

The relief in Karen's tone was obvious. Matt realised with a faint surge of guilt that he had forgotten to let his friends know just how late he would be coming home.

"Are you alright?" She rose from the chair that she had been sitting in, and crossed the room to give him a brief hug. Matt winced. He hadn't meant to let her know that anything was amiss, but had been too caught up in his thoughts to keep his face neutral. "No offence, Matt, but you look like shit."

He smiled. Karen always knew how to cheer him up- in a roundabout sort of way.

How much would it be safe to share with her? He would never tell an outright lie, but he hated the half-truths that he was forced to give her. Matt knew full well, though, that he would spin a thousand tall tales if it kept his friends out of danger. He ran a hand over his face.

"Last night, I- I ran into an old acquaintance." He spoke slowly, weighing every word. "He asked for my help with a... a difficult case."

"Can I help?" Karen's response was immediate, and Matt smiled again. She had always been this way; kind, selfless, eager to help. He loved that about her.

Behind her, Foggy wandered through the doorway, bringing the warm, bitter scent of a strong pot of coffee. "You're back!" He was grinning, Matt could tell, and there was a quiet *chunk* as he set the coffee down. "Why were you out so late?"

"I'm... looking for a child." Hesitation, always hesitation, always wondering *is it safe? Will she be safe?* "All I know about him is his name. He's called Theseus."

"Theseus? That's not a common name. I can check the missing persons reports?" Karen offered.

“He wouldn’t be in there,” Matt replied heavily. The boy was an offworlder- who could possibly have reported him missing here?

“Why not?” Foggy sounded curious. “Is he an illegal immigrant?”

“Well... I suppose. Something like that.” Another half truth, but he hoped that it was close enough. He could tell Foggy the rest later.

“Hmm.” Karen sighed through her nose. “That’ll make this a lot harder.” She furrowed her brow thoughtfully. “I’m assuming that we can’t get the police involved?”

“No, definitely not. It’s- complicated.”

“Don’t worry.” A warm hand squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. “We’ll find him. I’ll see what I can do.”

Matt nodded, reaching up to rest his hand on hers. He turned his head to give her a smile, trying to show her just how grateful he was for her support. She was the best thing in his life, and he would do almost anything to protect her.

Foggy cleared his throat, and Matt’s smile grew more serious. He heard his friend sigh with a mixture of cheerful sarcasm and genuine affection as he led the way back into the office. Reluctantly, knowing that Karen would understand, he gave her hand a final squeeze and followed.

“So,” Foggy said, as soon as Matt closed the door quietly behind him. “What was all that about? Vigilante business again?”

“Have you seen the morning news?” Matt drew out his chair and sat down.

“Only the headlines.” Foggy frowned. “You mean the boiler explosion? I think an elderly couple got caught in it, didn't they?” Matt could hear the last traces of mirth fade from his voice. “It was pretty tragic.”

“Except,” Matt said steadily. “It didn't happen. They needed that block sealed off, and I guess that's the lie they told to explain it.”

“But why? What's down there?”

Matt shook his head. “A portal. One that leads to another dimension.”

“*Fuck* .” Foggy exhaled softly. “Again?”

“Yes.”

“But then- what does the kid have to do with it?”

“He's one of the offworlders that arrived through it.” Matt explained. “From what I can tell, half of the others want him dead. And the other half are trying to save him.” His head pounded, and he pressed a hand to his temple.

Foggy winced. “Poor kid. “ His eyes were narrowed. “But- why are they *here* ? What has this got to do with us? They're not staging an invasion?”

“No- well- not all of them. I don't know.” Matt scowled. “The problem is that SHIELD got hold of them before I could learn anything concrete. They're blocking all information surrounding the situation.”

“SHIELD's involved? But they're not taking care of it?”

“Fury-” Matt hesitated, and sighed. “I don’t think Fury really believes that the boy exists. I can’t be sure that he’s looking for him, and he won’t let me help.”

“Right.” Foggy closed his eyes. “So. We need to find this kid, before the guys trying to kill him do?”

“Pretty much.”

“Got it. Great. But how do we-”

“Guys!” Karen’s shout filtered through the closed door. “Get out here! This is important!”

The pair glanced at each other, and then, in unison, scrambled for the door. They burst into the living room, to see Karen standing before the television. Silently, she pointed to the screen, where a news anchor stood before the smoking remains of a half-destroyed alleyway.

“...The Avengers have made an appearance at the scene of the boiler explosion that killed two people late last night.” She was saying. “Eyewitnesses describe the devastating fight that took place, though could not provide details as to the nature of the attackers. What the fight was for- and whom it was fought against- remains unknown. Reporters have been unable to gain access, and instructed to clear the scene. All traffic around the area has been halted, and the block itself was evacuated following the explosion. Authorities advise...”

“We need to go.” Matt turned to the doorway, ignoring the exhaustion creeping through his veins. He had no idea what he would do once he reached the scene, especially in civilian clothes, but he needed to know exactly what was happening.

While Daredevil flew across the rooftops, searching and searching for a lost child, Tommy and Josh walked the back alleys far below, perfectly oblivious to the vigilante’s hunt.

“Are you *sure* you can’t take those off?” Josh fretted quietly, gesturing to the armour that encased Tommy like a shell. “You’ll stick out like a sore thumb wearing all that. And what’s this part even made from?” He stared at the chestplate, gleaming blue and white beneath a dim shaft of dawn light.

“What do you mean? It’s just diamond.” Tommy grinned, and puffed out his chest. “Don’t you have one?”

“I- no, that’s... Did you say *diamond* ?” Josh spluttered, eyes widening. He stared at the chestplate, looking as though he’d never seen a diamond before in his life.

Tommy frowned indignantly. “Hey! My eyes are up here!” He wrapped his arms around the chestplate protectively.

“Why- why do you have armour m- made out of *diamonds* ?” Josh cried, looking as though his knees had gone weak. He winced as the sound echoed through the dim street, and looked frantically back and forth. “Do you know how m- much something like that is worth?”

“What do you *mean* , why?” Tommy shook his head. “It has *way* better durability than iron. And we’re definitely not selling it! It’s my armour, I’m gonna need it if Dream finds me!”

“I- ok, ok, I’m not g- gonna *force* you to sell it.” Josh passed a hand over his face. “But, *please* , p-put it away, just for now! Look, man, if anyone else finds you carrying actual genuine diamonds, things are g- gonna get real dangerous, real fast.” He muttered the warning, eyes still darting up and down the street. Tommy didn’t know what for- the road was empty.

“But why don’t they just go mining by themselves? It’s not like diamonds are *that* hard to find.” Tommy stared curiously at Josh, wondering yet again about the strangeness of this new server. “Unless, I don’t know- do you have a lot of mobs in your caves?” A thought struck him. “Are you on the Caves and Cliffs update?”

“What? What u- update? Look- we can’t just go *mining* for diamonds, that’s... that’s not how it w- works here.” Josh’s stammer was worsening, his speech growing fast and anxious.

Tommy tilted his head, torn between a fervent desire to stop pressuring his new ally, and a need to *know* - to understand what all the fuss was about. “But *why* ?”

“Please, just p- put it away b- before anyone sees it!” Josh pleaded, running a nervous hand through his hair.

Tommy sighed, and briefly closed his eyes. “Alright. Fine.”

There was no point in pushing Josh any further. It wasn’t fair on him. And maybe- just maybe- the panicked stammer in his words was nudging Tommy’s memory slowly back in time, back to a loneliness so deep it *ached* , and fresh bruises painting his skin and his items lost in little starburst explosions and-

He cut himself off.

Slowly, carefully, piece by piece, he stowed his armour in his inventory. It was the sensible thing to do, he told himself, silently, and nestled the iron boots beside his chestplate. It wasn’t worth the risk of damaging the armour before it would be needed in earnest; he had no iron to repair it, and besides, he didn’t even have a crafting table. It was safer this way.

And besides , said a quiet, warm voice in the back of his mind. *It just looked a bit ugly. Don’t you think? I really don’t like armour.* A soft laugh. *I reckon we should forbid people from wearing it within our walls.*

Tommy shook himself, and closed his inventory, leaving him wearing nothing but his old red-and-white shirt and a pair of ratty jeans. The hem of the shirt was fraying badly, and the rips at the knees of the trousers were shedding threads. A faded bloodstain had spread across one of his sleeves. The whole outfit was covered in grime and stubborn streaks of mud and dirt.

Fortunately- judging by the holes in Josh's sweater, and the tattered rips in his beanie and his rucksack- untidy clothing seemed to be the fashion in this odd world.

There you go, Wilbur's voice continued; soothing and relentless. He reached out to adjust the tricorn hat of Tommy's pristine, navy blue uniform. *It suits you*.

Teeth gritted, Tommy forced the memory away. But his bones were already *aching* with feeling , with bitter grief and lingering longing and he cast wildly around for a distraction- something, *anything* to haul himself out of the gaping pit of misery that had yawned open beneath him.

"Where are we going?" He asked. Too fast. Josh was looking at him sidelong, and worry was evident on his face. To Tommy's relief, though, he didn't press.

"Well..." He hesitated, brow furrowed. "It's t-too late for a shelter. The good ones will have filled up a- a while ago. And the bad ones..." He trailed off, fidgeting with the hem of his sweater. "We're n-not going to the bad ones."

Tommy noted, in the back of his mind, that Josh had relaxed somewhat in the absence of his armour.

"I know a group of guys who usually camp together at Central Park," He continued. "Hopefully, they'll let us stick with them tomorrow." He shrugged. "For tonight, we're going to have to sleep on the street."

"Alright." Tommy looked resignedly down at the floor. "I've slept on worse." He scuffed at the gritty ground with his foot, oblivious to Josh's sudden, shocked glance in his direction. "But I'm *hungry* , man. And you did promise me food."

"Yeah- yeah, I d-did." Josh ran an anxious hand through his hair, and tugged his beanie back into place. "There's a convenience store nearby, it'll be open. I'll get you a sandwich from there."

It didn't take them long to reach the shop. Josh led the way inside, and Tommy trailed behind him, staring around with wide eyes.

The store was painfully bright. Some kind of dazzling sea lanterns were set into the ceiling, and the great glass windows at the front allowed the light to spill out across the dark street. The inside was filled with shelves, each piled high with rows of colourful items that Tommy didn't recognise. None of them were stacked, strangely enough; single items were simply placed neatly on top of each other. And all of them, he realised, seemed to be wrapped up with an odd cover. He wondered what it was for.

Josh navigated the maze of shelves with ease, and approached a smaller room towards the back. It was much colder here, and the walls were hidden behind bottles filled with what must be potions, and small boxes.

"Okay. Which sandwich do you want?" He waved an arm vaguely towards one of the shelves. Tommy frowned up at him. "Uh- right. I'll just get you the ham and cheese. Everyone likes that one, don't they?" Josh picked out a small, triangular carton, and held it up for Tommy's inspection.

Bemused, Tommy tilted his head. "Whatever you say, king."

They found the owner of the shop standing behind a counter, and Josh handed him the box. The man squinted at them both, and his expression grew faintly sad. Quietly, he told them the price, and Josh pulled out a small handful of coins.

Tommy's eyes widened at the sight; each was labelled with the number ten, or twenty; there was even one *fifty*. The guy was *rich*. Why had he been so impressed by his diamonds? Besides their use in armour and tools, they were more or less worthless on the SMP. Anyone could go mining for them. But to have so much in an actual *currency* -

Wilbur had spent a long time talking about setting something similar up in L'Manberg. Tommy decided to stop thinking about it.

Josh paid for the box. For some reason, the owner looked almost regretful as he took the coins. He hesitated, and then reached over to a nearby shelf and picked up another carton. He didn't say a word, but as he passed the sandwich to Tommy, he handed the extra box to him alongside it.

With a nod, Josh led them out of the shop.

The "sandwich" turned out to be nothing more than some meat and cheese folded between two slices of bread. Tommy devoured it hungrily the moment they sat down, tucked away beside a warm air vent at the back of a dirty side road. The smaller box, as it turned out, was a drink.

"It's c-called apple juice," Josh explained. "You've got to stick the straw in it- like this. And then you can drink through it." He handed it back to Tommy, who took a sip. The juice was sickly sweet, but not unpleasantly so. In fact, it tasted pretty good. He'd have to ask Tubbo, or perhaps Niki to make him some...

Unless, of course, Niki still hated him. And Tubbo wasn't done with the constant trouble he brought.

If he ever made it home.

If he ever saw them again.

A humiliating lump was forming in Tommy's throat. He swallowed hard, and was relieved when Josh stood up to drag a dumpster in front of their hidey-hole, shielding them from the wind- and from any prying eyes. Quietly, he sniffled, under cover of the screech of metal on the road, and scrubbed at his eyes with his sleeve. Fortunately, the darkness was enough to hide his face from view, and by the time Josh sat back down, he had crushed any sadness back into a familiar little hole somewhere in his heart.

He opened his inventory, and searched through it by touch alone, brushing past dirt and cobble and sticks until he found what he was looking for.

His hand sank into the soft tufts of one of Friend's old fleeces. He pulled it out, wrapped it around his shoulders, and then- unable to stop himself- buried his face into the soft material. The warm scents of sheep and blue and home filled his nose, and a faint, echoing voice sounded in his mind. *This is Friend, Tommy!*

Beside him, Josh had unrolled some sort of blanket-sack. He tucked himself into it, and the pair huddled closer to the faint flow of warm air rising from the vent. "Y- you warm enough, Tommy?" He asked quietly.

Tommy cleared his throat. "Uh- yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." He paused. "Thank you."

"No problem." Josh smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling up. Though Tommy could barely make it out in the dim light, he smiled back.

Tomorrow, they would find a better place. Josh had promised. And tomorrow, he would be back on the run. Dream would not stop hunting him. His first day in this strange new world would begin.

For now, though, he wasn't starving, or freezing. And he wasn't alone.

He wasn't alone anymore.

Tommy slept in fitful waves, startled back to wakefulness by the fluttering of a pigeon overhead, or the yowls of a vicious catfight a few streets away. He tossed and turned, snuggled down into Friend's old fleece, and eventually managed to drift back to sleep.

The moon was beginning to sink low in the sky when the threads of nearby voices startled him from his slumber once again.

“ *Please* ,” A familiar voice was whispering. “I *told* you. I don’t want to do this anymore!”

Tommy sat bolt upright, disoriented from sleep and hunger. *Wilbur* . His big brother was in trouble.

“I’m d-done.” The voice continued, desperate and pleading. “Leave m-me alone!”

Shock sparked down Tommy’s spine, snapping him into awareness. The image of Wilbur’s frightened eyes vanished from his mind, replaced rapidly by the reality of his surroundings.

Beyond the shelter of the bins, Josh was facing three figures. The light was too dim for Tommy to make them out clearly, but he could tell that they were big enough that they would be hard to take in a fight.

He froze as fear shot through his brain. Had- had Dream found them? Had Josh been working for him, after all? The idea was abhorrent, but- it wouldn’t be the first time that he had been betrayed, would it?

“Hey, c’mon, man. Work with me a little!” One of the figures was speaking, his voice deep and rough. Tommy let out a shaky breath; it didn’t sound like either Dream or Punz. “Y’know how it is ‘round here. Ya can’t just abandon us like that!”

“I just- I just g-got a job.” Josh was trembling like a leaf, but he stood firm. “I... I’m finally g-getting back on m-my feet...”

“I know, I know!” The other man spoke over him. “Look, man, I’m proud of ya!”

Though the voice was unfamiliar to Tommy, the tone was not. “But, the thing is, this package needs to be sold. And, well, I can’t exactly do it on my own now, can I? I need people to do it for me.”

He sounded like Big Q, Tommy realised suddenly. Quackity used the same amiable, cheerful, forceful voice whenever he tried to rope some poor sod into one of his latest schemes.

“Liam, p-please...” Josh’s voice had trailed into a whisper. “Can’t you f-find someone else?”

“C’mon, man! Be a bro, do me a solid! I know I can trust you! And it’s the last time, I promise!”

“You’ve s-said that before.” The note of derision in Josh’s nervous voice was almost undetectable. “Last time.”

Tommy’s eyes narrowed. While he didn’t know these men, and he didn’t understand what they wanted, he could tell when people were up to no good. These bastards were intimidating the only person who had been kind to him in this strange new world. He, Tommy Innit, was not going to stand for this.

“Josh?” He stood up, brushing tufts of fleece from his sleeves. “What’s going on? These people bothering you?”

Josh spun to face him. “Tommy! Get back!” Even in the darkness, Tommy could see his eyes widening. “S-stay out of this!”

Tommy ignored him. These men didn’t scare him. And besides, Josh clearly needed the help.

He stepped closer, glaring at the thugs. Two of them looked like mercenaries, hulking figures with big hands and oily clothes. But the third- Liam, Josh had called him- was a little cleaner, and much shorter than his fellows.

He turned his head lazily to face Tommy as he approached. “Hey there, kid.” A nasty grin spread across his face. “You wanna go sell some drugs for me?”

The question hit Tommy like a punch to the gut, stopping him dead in his tracks. Memories rose in his mind, images of the brewing stands and the old camarvan and *Wilbur*, always Wilbur, of his pride and his hope and his greed...

They had made so many plans, him and his big brother, scheming away for hours; Wilbur’s grand ideas and Tommy’s enthusiasm, slowly building up to that mischievous grin and that final question. “*You want to sell some drugs with me?*”

And it had been followed with some of the greatest- and some of the darkest- times of his life. And eventually, finally, it had led him here: this strange new world, with a kind, nervous young man who was not his brother, and that same damned question.

Tommy stumbled back, staring up at Liam’s horrible smile. His throat had grown too dry to make a sound; and besides, he had no words to say.

In the end, it was Josh who spoke next. “Shit, Liam, what are you d-doing?” He stepped forwards, putting himself between Tommy and the thugs. “L-leave the kid out of this.”

“Well,” The falsely playful tone was fading from Liam’s voice now, replaced by the beginnings of anger. “I’m gonna need *someone*.” Beside him, his fellows stepped nearer, looming threateningly over Josh’s slim form. Tommy bristled at the sight. “Either you sell it, or the kid. I could care less. But it’s gotta get sold, or Donny’s gonna have my ass. And then, when he’s done with me- well, it won’t take me long to track down either of ya.”

Somewhere within Tommy’s chest, a painful knot of tension was beginning to unravel. The more that Liam talked, the more his terror eased, until his thoughts began to clear once again.

This man was not Wilbur. Not in the slightest. And he never would be. He had none of his charisma, his dreams, his boldness. And he wasn't Big Q, either, though he seemed to be trying very hard to imitate him. But he lacked his sharp intelligence, his wits, his sass.

He was just a guy, a guy with power on his side, yes, but he was not a guy who would go on to build a nation. He was not a man who would do whatever it took to achieve his impossible ambitions.

He was just a guy.

Tommy smiled his most shit-eating grin, and swaggered forwards. "You, Liam, seem to me to be a bit of a *pussy* ." Get on the guy's nerves, wind him up a bit. It was one of the things that he did best, after all.

Josh did not seem to agree. "Shut *up* , Tommy!" He hissed, trying to push him back out of sight.

The gesture made Tommy smile. It had been so long since anybody had actually tried to *protect* him, rather than pushing him forwards into the fight. But by this point, it really wasn't necessary.

"I'm just telling it as I see it, boss man," He continued with an elaborate shrug.

"Nah, let the kid have his say," Liam said loudly, the false humour returning to his voice. He shoved Josh out of the way with ease, stepping forwards to face Tommy. "Think you're really funny, don't ya?" He reached out with one meaty hand, and pulled Tommy to his side. "Fresh on the streets, still smelling of home. Bet you think your parents are gonna come looking for you, try to get you outta this mess, yeah? That this is all gonna be over in a couple days." The grip on his shoulder tightened painfully, but Tommy didn't try to pull away. He wasn't going to squirm in front of this brute.

"But I've got news for ya, kid." Liam continued, leaning down until his face was uncomfortably close. "They won't. No-one will. These streets are gonna be your home from now on."

“Yeah? What’s that got to do with anything?” Tommy kept up the brash tone, trying to hide just how much those words had truly affected him.

“Sooner or later, kid, you’re gonna have to find a job.” Liam spoke with a twisted kind of mocking sympathy. “And when nobody’s willing to take ya, you’re gonna have to come crawling back to me.” He laughed, but there was no humour in it. “Eventually, everyone starts working for Kingpin.”

Tommy met the man’s smug gaze with a mixture of defiance and bewilderment. He narrowed his eyes. “Look, man, your little mind games aren’t going to work on me.” Shaking his head, he glared up at Liam. “Where I’m from, people run this sort of business properly. And you? You haven’t got shit on them!” The man’s expression soured rapidly, but Tommy kept going relentlessly. “Fresh on the streets? Parents?” He scoffed indignantly. “What are you even talking about?”

Josh was staring at him, his eyes wide and pleading. *Stop talking, Tommy* . But it was far, far too late for Tommy to stop now.

“You know, I lived in a cave before I got here? And before *that* , it was nothing more than a *shack* on a beach out in the middle of nowhere-” He choked, suddenly, as the memories rose, but gritted his teeth to force them back down. To cover his hesitation, he twisted out of Liam’s grip, and stepped quickly back to Josh’s side. Without even looking, he drew a knockback stick from his inventory.

“And as for family?” The words were coming fast now, and he spat them out like poison. “They don’t care about me! They never did! The only- the only one who-” He growled, furiously. “The only one who might have done went and fucking killed himself!”

Abruptly, painfully, he ran out of words. Silence fell, deafeningly loud, and he fought for breath.

Liam stared him down, his scowl deepening. Beside him, his goons began to move closer, fists raised. But as Liam took a step forward, just as Tommy readied himself to dodge a punch, Josh shoved him back and threw up his hands.

“Leave him alone, please!” He shouted. “I’ll do it, just d-don’t...”

And just like that, the tension dissipated. Liam was suddenly all smiles once again, and the thugs beside him relaxed.

“ *What ?*” Tommy spun to face him, but Josh was staring at Liam.

“Glad you’ve come to your senses, my guy.” Liam tossed him a backpack, his grin widening lazily. “Here you go. I want it gone by the end of the week, you hear me?”

Without another word, Liam snapped his fingers. The three of them turned, headed down the road, and around the corner. Out of sight.

Tommy watched them leave, anger beginning to churn slowly in the pit of his stomach. How dare they simply go on their way, leaving careless devastation in their wake and vanishing as though nothing had happened?

Teeth gritted, he turned back towards Josh. “What are you doing? I could have beaten him, no problem!” Warmth flowered in his chest as he thought again of Josh pulling him away from the danger, but he ignored it. “You- you didn’t have to step in.”

“N-no. You couldn’t have.” Josh passed a hand over his face. He sounded very tired. “He works for Kingpin.” Clearly taking note of Tommy’s confusion, he continued. “Those guys are u-untouchable. Not even the police g-go after them.”

“Yeah, but- I don’t care who they work for! I could have just beaten them up!”

Josh began trudging back towards the little camp that they had set up last night. “Okay. Let’s say that you d-did beat him up.” He glanced over his shoulder as he spoke, making sure that Tommy was behind him. “What then? Were you p-planning to kill him?”

Tommy opened his mouth, and then stopped short.

“Yeah. And then, when h-he comes back, he’ll bring a gun. And what h-happens then?”

“Well... I guess I’ll just have to kill him when he comes back?”

Josh sighed, rolling up his blanket sack. “And if you actually m-manage to do it? You’ll just end up in e-even bigger trouble. Then, you won’t just have Kingpin’s men after y-you, but Daredevil as well.” He reached for the blue fleece still lying beside him, and brushed off the dust. “And t-trust me, you do not want to be on his b-bad side.”

Tommy tensed as Josh picked up the fleece. He watched silently as his ally shook off the leaves still clinging stubbornly to the wool, before folding it neatly. Silently, Josh passed it back to him, and Tommy felt the tension drain from his shoulders.

“Why?” He asked quietly, tucking the fleece back into his inventory. “Who’s Daredevil?”

“He’s a hero.” Josh replied solidly. “Although- well, technically he’s a v-vigilante.”

“A vigilante?”

“He’s... he’s the one who s-stops the bad guys. But only when the people who should be stopping them turn a b-blind eye.”

“Oh. Then- he can help us, can’t he?” Tommy asked, passing Josh a small metal cylinder that he seemed to think was a torch. “He could take on Liam, and the king pin of yours, right?”

“He’s fighting them already.” Josh tucked the torch into his pack, stuffed the little rucksack of “product” on top, and hoisted it back onto his shoulders. “I d-don’t think that he’ll be able to

help us now, though.”

“Why not?”

“Daredevil has bigger fish to fry. And Liam is practically a n-nobody.” He explained calmly. “Besides, he’s saved me once already. Now, it’s about t-time I save myself.”

They left the little street, walking side by side. Josh turned his face up to the first rays of dawn light, breaking through the gaps between the towers. “I can handle this, Tommy. Don’t worry about me.”

Tommy nodded, and tried not to think about the last time that somebody had assured him that they could handle it.

Josh wouldn’t- *couldn’t* - turn out like Wilbur.

They walked for hours. Gradually, the sun rose high overhead, and the streets began to fill with people.

Tommy gazed around, drinking in the sight; usually, he had only seen crowds this big on Hypixel broadcasts. But here, out in the sunlight, the city was full of people; people wearing all kinds of clothes, walking in every direction, their faces tired or bored or caught in faint half-smiles. He and Josh wove through them all, keeping close to the walls. To Tommy’s surprise, his smiles were rarely returned- people looked at him with what seemed to be pity, or sadness, or even anger. He wondered what he had done to offend them all.

Josh had been right, though, when he had asked Tommy to put his armour away. Nobody here wore any, despite the variety of clothing. At least he didn’t stand out too badly.

Right in the middle of the city, Josh led them across the street, through a gate, and into- Tommy did a double take- a *forest* .

The constant hum of the city was muffled as they walked down a winding path. Trees arced overhead, dappling the sunlight that fell across the ground. Lush grass grew around them, waving gently back and forth in the breeze. Tommy took a deep breath of air, enjoying the scent of moss and damp leaves.

“We’re almost there,” Josh told him. “This is Central Park.”

They didn’t have to walk far to find the homeless camp. The path wandered through the park, over a bridge that spanned a rushing river, and then dropped down into the shade of the trees. And then, beyond that...

The camp itself looked small, battered, and thoroughly miserable. A few tents had been pitched, though the soft ground had left them listing lopsidedly. A string had been tied between two trees, and two or three threadbare shirts were hanging from it, drying in the wan sunlight.

To Tommy’s faint surprise, though, the atmosphere felt lighthearted, almost relaxed. A small group of rough-looking people had gathered around a large can, crackling with smoky flames. A pan of something dark and bitter-smelling was simmering slowly above the little campfire.

A few logs had been dragged into a loose ring around the pot. The people themselves were sitting on them, some clutching dented mugs, others holding small bottles. They were chatting amongst each other, cheerfully swapping stories and news while they waited for whatever was in the pot to finish brewing.

A big, dark-skinned woman waved at Josh as they approached. She moved up a bit, nudging her fellows until they made them some space to sit down.

Uncertainly, Tommy glanced at Josh, and was relieved to see that his face had relaxed into a smile. “Pam! I d-didn’t realise that you’d be here!”

They sat down amidst good-natured jostles from the others on the log. Someone passed Tommy a small mug of that dark liquid; deep brown, a little grainy, but pleasantly warm. The bitter scent actually smelled surprisingly good.

“Josh! Haven’t seen you around in a while!” Pam clapped Josh on the shoulder, grinning at him. “How was rehab?”

“It was... honestly p-pretty good.” Josh gave her a shy smile. “I’ve been sober since.”

“Good for you, man! I told you you could do it!”

Across from them, a man sat forwards on his log. “Who’s the kid? Looks a bit old to be yours, Josh.”

“No! No, no, god- he’s... I ran into him y-yesterday.” Josh adjusted his beanie, looking flustered. “He had nowhere to go.”

“Aw. Your folks kicked you out, little dude?” Though the man’s voice was light, his brows were drawn in sympathy.

“Yeah.” Tommy muttered, wrapping his hands tighter around his cup. “Reckon they want me dead.”

“Oh, kid...” Pam’s smile faded into an expression that was equally sad and knowing. “Don’t let it get to you.” She reached out to rest a gentle hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay to be different. We’re not going to judge you here.”

Tommy knew that she was misunderstanding the reality of his situation. That didn't stop the lump in his throat from rising painfully, or the tears from pricking at the backs of his eyes. He swallowed, hard, trying to pull himself together.

In the end, he didn't correct her. It wasn't as though he could just tell them the truth.

He caught one or two glances in his direction. For a moment, he thought of the bitter, sad expressions of the people that he had passed earlier, and he almost bristled. But when he looked properly, all he could see was the same understanding sorrow that lingered in Pam's gaze.

The talk died down a little as more of the "cofie" was passed around. Josh wrapped both hands tightly around his, as though trying to absorb every bit of its warmth. He and Pam chatted quietly as they drank, and Tommy was fairly sure that they kept darting looks in his direction.

Once the pot had been emptied, and everyone had drained their mugs, the group began to disperse. Rucksacks were filled and slung onto shoulders, bottles were rinsed and drained with water from a rusted standing tap nearby. Two or three people stayed behind to keep a watchful eye on the tents and clear up the camp. The others disappeared into the woods or down the path, off towards the city, calling out goodbyes and reassurances that they would be back by sundown.

Josh and Pam left together, with Tommy beside them. It didn't take them long to make their way back into the city.

It was easier to ignore the stares with Pam around. She was relentlessly cheerful, making jokes and pointing out interesting details around them. Both Josh and Tommy were left in fits of laughter after one particularly pointed comment about a gentleman with a very expensive suit and equally large nose.

By the time the three of them had reached the street that they were looking for, Tommy had Josh's beanie perched on his head, and one of Pam's worn old bandannas tied around his neck like a scarf. They were all giggling at something that Josh had said, and Pam was calling greetings to anyone that she recognised.

Apparently, they had come to what Josh called a “soup kitchen” for lunch. Funnily enough, though, they didn’t eat soup, but something called a “grilled cheese”. Still, the people were friendly, and the food wasn’t bad. They sat on a bench together, talking ceaselessly as they devoured the warm, crunchy sandwiches.

After they had eaten, Josh stood up, and playfully snatched his beanie back from Tommy’s head. “Alright. I’m off t-to work.” He gave them both a smile. “Be good, Tommy, ok?”

And as Tommy spluttered indignantly, Josh grinned at Pam, and disappeared down the street. Pam rolled her eyes with a smirk, and reached out to help pull Tommy off of the bench that they had been sitting on.

They headed back towards the camp. Pam had agreed to take over the tent-guarding duties for the rest of the day, and Josh had told Tommy to stick close to her.

“Don’t worry, king.” Tommy had replied. “I’ll protect her.”

Josh had fought so hard to keep his face straight that his cheeks went scarlet.

Back in the camp, the sun was beginning to sink in the sky. People were making their way back, ready to settle in for the afternoon. Pam was busy clearing the ash from the campfire can, and Tommy did his best to help, scooping the dirt back into the hole they had dug for the soot to make sure that it didn’t go blowing across the park. For a while, they worked in comfortable silence, until Tommy finally asked the question that had been on his mind for a while.

“So,” He began, brushing the earth from his palms. “Why are you guys homeless?”

“That’s... well.” Pam raised her eyebrows. “Some of us, like you, were kicked out of our homes, and now we have nowhere else to go.” She explained, patiently. “And others have made some... some bad decisions, and the consequences led to this.”

Tommy nodded. “Yeah, but... why do you live like this? Why can’t we just, you know. Make ourselves a house?”

“Cause none of us exactly have the money for it, Tom.”

“But there’s plenty of resources around!” Tommy looked back and forth, at the rocks that lined the riverbank and the thicket of trees. “There’s stone, and wood... We could make a shack, at least!”

“No, we can’t just go cutting down trees!” Pam exclaimed, her eyes bright with amusement,

“Why?” Tommy asked, for what felt like the millionth time. Why was everything so *complicated* in this world? And why was nobody explaining it to him?

“It’s against the law,” She told him. “This is a park, you’re not allowed to trash it.”

“ *Oh* . So the admin’s gonna stop us?”

“Well, the police certainly will!” She laughed, the corners of her eyes crinkling. “We can’t just go breaking *all* the laws of the country we live in.”

“But- then this country is stupid! Why don’t we just make a new one?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Tommy froze.

Why don’t we just declare our independence?

And, without warning, he was standing beside a weathered old caravan, the smells of the pine forest and potion steam filling his nose. *So we're not allowed to monopolise the drugs market?* A smile curled across Wilbur's lips as he spoke. *Why don't we just make a country where we can?*

This was it. This was the answer.

Tommy snapped back to awareness, nerves alight with excitement. "Why *don't* we just make a new one? I've done it before!"

The rest of the camp had clearly been eavesdropping on the conversation. Tommy saw glances of surprise, of entertainment, of curiosity, and continued; "My older brother is- *was* a politician! And I was his right-hand man- I know how to run a country!"

"So what would you have us do?" Pam's smile was fond. She was obviously humouring him, but Tommy pressed on anyway. The plan was perfect: surely, once he had explained it, she would understand.

"Ok, first of all," He started, stepping forwards to stand in the centre of the group. "We'll need walls! We've got to gather concrete, and- and wool. And we should find some yellow flowers and ink so that we can dye them."

The camp was beginning to stir now, taking an interest in the ragged teenager proposing his impossible idea. Tommy took heart in the slowly rising enjoyment, and looked around. "Are there any sheep around here? I think Tubbo showed me how to build a wool farm..."

"Best I can do is cardboard boxes," A guy called, offering a small stack of what seemed to be toughened paper.

Tommy took them happily, sizing them up in his head. "That'll work!" He gazed around at the little camp, imagining a wall of them surrounding the lopsided tents. "We'll build up a good defence."

“That’ll show the police when they show up to clear us all out again!” A woman shouted, to general laughter and agreement.

“And we’ll need a cool name!” Tommy beamed. “One that will strike fear into the hearts of our enemies! I propose- Logstedshire!”

“Hang on- why are we British all of a sudden?”

“And we can’t forget a flag, and an anthem...” He trailed off. Those weren’t exactly his forte. He wished, suddenly, that Niki was here- or Wilbur.

No. Now was not the time. Focus on the present.

“We can decide those later, once everyone’s made it back!” He called, shoving the thoughts out of his mind. “And then, we declare our independence!”

The little group burst into cheers, and together, they got to work.

One more wall, Tommy thought to himself. One more country.

This one would be better, he promised himself. It had to be. He’d make sure of it.

He wouldn’t fail again.

Josh returned later that evening, accompanied by the rest of the people from the camp- those who had a job, at least. Most of them had brought a bit of food, and were splitting it carefully

amongst themselves.

With a bemused glance at the piles of boxes surrounding them, Josh made a beeline for Tommy. He clutched a small, slightly shiny bag in his hands, which he passed over with a smile.

“I work at a restaurant,” He explained to Tommy. “Sometimes, they let me t-take the leftovers.”

“That’s awesome!” Tommy pulled open the bag. The smell of some unknown spices and vegetables wafted through the air, making his mouth water. The carton inside was filled with a mixture of meat and potatoes, dotted with bits of carrot and onion.

It reminded Tommy vaguely of the meals that Techno liked to cook, after a long day in the potato farms. Strangely enough, the memory didn’t come with the usual sharp stab of pain in his heart. More like a warm, gentle ache, both comforting and sad.

Tommy didn’t quite know how to respond, and so he tried diligently to ignore it.

“Want to share?” He asked Josh quickly, though he was already clutching the plastic fork like a lifeline. To his faint relief, Josh shook his head. “I’ve eaten already, d-don’t worry. This is for you.”

“Hey, Josh!” Pam appeared from nowhere, holding a freshly campfire-toasted chunk of bread. “Wanna hear what we’ve been doing?”

“Yeah- I s-see that you’ve been busy...” Josh glanced towards the stacks of cardboard. “What’s w-with the fence?”

“It’s not a *fence* !” Tommy cried in outrage, his mouth full of mashed potato. “It’s a *wall* !” He swallowed, and waved his fork in Josh’s direction. “How *dare* you!”

“Okay, okay! Sorry, I s-see it now!” Josh held up his hands in surrender, unable to restrain his laughter. “Wow, what a g-great and magnificent wall you’ve built!”

“We’ve started a new country!” Pam told him, eyes shining and grin wide. “It was Tom’s idea. The old one was just a bit shit, y’know?”

“Uh... yeah?”

“Thing is, we still need an anthem,” She continued, with an expectant look towards Josh. “You used to write songs, didn’t you? Why don’t you make us one?”

Tommy perked up, turning around to stare at Josh. “You wrote music?”

Josh winced, and seemed to squirm uncomfortably in the sudden spotlight of attention. “No, really, I c-can’t...”

“Oh, come on!” Someone called from the crowd. “You used to sing all the time!”

The friendly clamour grew louder, carried on encouraging shouts and hopeful words. The evening was warm, the campfire bright, and everyone had eaten that night. The atmosphere was cheerful and excited, and everyone was hoping for a good song.

“Please...” Josh had flushed scarlet, head ducked in embarrassment.

“My brother used to sing.” Tommy said, and paused. He didn’t know why he had blurted it out. But suddenly, he couldn’t stop. “He wrote our last anthem. It was beautiful- I used to sing it to the flowers, trying to get them to grow...” He trailed off awkwardly.

Fortunately, Pam laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Want to sing it for us?”

For the briefest moment, Tommy hesitated. *Want to sing it for us?*

Did he? Did he want to revive a song that he had not sung for months? Did he want to sing a song that had once represented *everything* - hope, freedom, sanctuary- and had come to mean nothing but grief and despair?

Did he want to fight for it? Bring it with him into this world, this place, this life? Did he want to try to restore what it had once been?

The fire crackled, sending bright sparks flying as he cleared his throat.

He started quietly, his voice lower than it had been since he had last sung this song. The clamour of the crowd softened as the people leaned in to listen closer.

Beside him, Josh looked up, the embarrassment fading from his features.

At first, his voice wavered, unsteadily catching the notes. But he persevered, singing each word with his best attempt at Wilbur's clarity, his precision, and soon enough, the tune evened out, grew stronger. By the time he reached the chorus, his voice was echoing through the clearing.

Around him, he could see people catching on to the tune, swaying in time to the music. A couple clasped hands and began a slow, circular dance, making their way around the campfire. Out of the corner of his eye, Tommy noticed Josh sidling up to Pam with a small, shy smile. He reached out, mouthing a nervous question, and Pam beamed as she took his hands. There were a few whoops from the crowd as they began to dance.

Tommy spread out his arms as he continued the song, allowing his voice to rise, to speed up, joyful and loud. He reached the end of the first run with a flourish, and began once again, and this time, people joined in. The dances broke up as people stopped to sing, and Josh and Pam waltzed their way back to Tommy's side.

They began the second verse, and Tommy allowed his eyes to drift closed, losing himself in the song. The scents of campfire smoke and toasted bread filled the air, and the chorus of happy voices was carried on the breeze. Occasional whistles and cheerful shouts punctuated the music, accompanied by laughter and cheers. Their song echoed off of the walls that they had built, those great black and yellow walls that surrounded the camarvan.

Tommy beamed with pleasure, with pride. Flushed with success, his eyes flew open, and he turned to face Wilbur, certain that he would see equal delight on his big brother's face.

Josh was gazing at Pam as Tommy spun around, which was fortunate, because it meant that he could hide the way that his voice choked and died, and the way that the grin vanished from his face. It meant that Tommy could fight unnoticed for recovery, drag himself from his memories, force himself back to the present, as the song swirled around the images of his past. It meant that he would not have to reveal the fact that his heart had once again shattered into razor shards that tore agonisingly at his flesh.

It meant that he had time to compose himself back into some semblance of a person whose heart could beat and lungs could breathe and mind ran in the present, rather than endlessly slipping backwards into the past. It meant that when Josh finally looked around at him, he could grin and laugh and sing even louder, belting the words out into the night together.

Josh really did have a beautiful voice. Tommy smiled as he listened, fists clenched with the effort of not comparing him to Wilbur.

The music and dancing went on long into the night. It was only when people's throats began to grow sore from singing and laughing for hours that the camp began to quiet down. The campfire had burned low, the food was finished, and one by one, people began tucking themselves into blanket sacks and disappearing into tents.

Josh had also unrolled his blanket, and was settling down to sleep, when he seemed to realise that Tommy hadn't joined him. Instead, he was merely sitting on the grass, gazing up at the few stars that were still bright enough to be visible amidst the harsh light of the city.

He sat up, brows furrowed with concern. "Can't s-sleep?"

“Yeah,” Tommy murmured, still staring at the sky. “It’s just- you know. Talking about L’Manberg, and- and singing the anthem. It’s got me thinking about- about the past. Not a big deal or anything, but- yeah.”

“Thinking about your b-brother?”

Tommy shivered, and hoped fervently that Josh hadn’t seen. “Yeah.”

“Is he... still around?” Josh tilted his head. “Sounds as if you t-two were close. Couldn’t he help you out n-now?”

“He’s dead.” Tommy’s voice was flat.

“I’m- I’m sorry.”

“What for? You weren’t the one who killed him.”

“I’m just- just sorry.”

The next day dawned bright, but cold. There were plenty of tired grumbles as the camp awoke, and begrudgingly began to go about with their morning.

Josh and Pam brought Tommy around the parts of the city within walking range of the camp, making sure that he could always find his way back if he got lost. They returned to the soup kitchen at midday for some food, and then Josh left for work.

Back at the camp, Tommy helped Pam with some of the chores, before deciding that it was high time to add another layer of boxes to their wall. He had collected a nice stash of them throughout the morning, snatching them from the street and stowing them within his inventory, and set to work with gusto.

It was only when he heard a shout in the distance that he looked up.

One of their group- Mark, if he was remembering correctly- was pelting towards them across the grass. Tommy frowned; wasn't Mark one of the few people with an actual job? Why was he back so early?

Heaving for breath, Mark stumbled into the centre of the camp. "There's been... an attack!" He shouted between gasps. "The Avengers are assembling!"

"No..." Pam stared at him, quietly horror struck. Rapidly, she seemed to pull herself together. "Okay. If the Avengers are out in force, then whatever's happening is serious." She set her jaw and straightened up. "Everyone! Pack up, now. Be ready to move, *fast*, if the evacuation alarms sound!"

There was a flurry of movement as the camp came to life. People hurried for their bags, their tents, folding their lives into rucksacks.

Tommy leapt down from the wall and hurried to Pam's side. "Here," She said, quickly, tossing him an old knapsack. "Pack up our site, alright?"

"Will do, boss man." Without another word, he turned towards the patch of grass that they had claimed for their sleeping bags. Side by side, they shoved their belongings out of sight. Tommy slipped some of the heavier items into his inventory, trying not to let Pam see; he wouldn't feel the weight, and it was less for her to carry, but he knew that he couldn't let her discover something so obviously unnatural in this world.

"But- what's going on?" He asked, folding his fleece. "Who are the- the Avengers? Are they attacking us?"

"What?" Pam looked bewildered. "No- they're the *heroes* . You haven't heard of them?"

"Heroes?" Now Tommy was looking surprised. "Like Heracles? Or Achilles?"

"No, not like- look, those were made up. These guys are real. They protect us."

"You seriously haven't heard of Tony Stark? The Iron Man?" Mark chimed in.

"Captain America? Thor? The Hulk?" Pam's eyebrows rose even higher as Tommy merely shook his head.

"So- why are we running?"

"Because, Tom, if the Avengers are assembling, then something very powerful is out for blood," Pam explained, almost calmly. "And we need to get as far away as we can, to avoid any repeats of the Incident." She glanced over her shoulder. "Mark? Did you see the attacker?"

"No. I rushed back here as soon as I heard that the Avengers were out in force. All I know is that someone was screaming about a man in green flying through the sky."

Tommy froze.

A horrible feeling was trickling its way down his spine. He suddenly had a nasty realisation that he might know exactly what was invading this world.

Dream, it seemed, had not stopped hunting him down.

Sam sat quietly in the centre of his strange glass cell. Around him, little humans circled like wolves, garbed in long white coats and scribbling rapidly in their tiny notebooks.

He was exhausted.

Across from him, in the middle of an identical cell, George lay perfectly still. Since his collapse outside the portal, he hadn't moved a muscle beyond his shallow breathing. If it had been anyone else, Sam would have been increasingly anxious about his state.

Perhaps he had been wrong to stay with him. Maybe he should have fled with Sapnap when he still had the chance. At least then he would still be on Dream's tail, providing Tommy with what little protection he could...

But no; without Antfrost and Bad, they were already two hunters short. If they lost George, too, then they would have no chance of actually catching Dream. And besides, he wasn't going to abandon his ally to the grasp of these white-coated sharks.

He passed a hand across his tired eyes and stood back up to continue pacing around his cage.

It wasn't as though he had not tried to cooperate with these people. He had done everything he could to make them see that they were on the same side- but nobody had listened. With a sigh, he thought back to his first talk with Fury, the leader of the people that Daredevil had named "the good guys."

After they had boarded that incredible flying redstone contraption, he had been sat down on an uncomfortable chair facing a small table, and all four of his hands had been tied behind his back.

Well, he doubted that they had deliberately made all of the furniture too small for him. That didn't make it all any less discomfoting.

He had stowed his trident, and even his armour, in an attempt to appear more friendly; but all that happened was that the people in white coats went into a flurry of harried activity. Bewildered, he had frowned at them- yes, this was a new world, but... surely they had *inventories* , at the very least? Prime, how could they manage without them?

Once they had made sure that he couldn't possibly escape- a wholly incorrect assumption, on their part- Fury had stepped into the room, and sat down in the chair across from him.

"So, Sam." He had begun. "That's what Daredevil calls you, yes?"

Fury was an imposing man, Sam noted. He carried an air of command about him, one that said that he would take nonsense from nobody. And yet there was something in his demeanour that left Sam feeling oddly at ease. The harsh, calculating anger that Fury had directed toward them less than an hour ago had disappeared. Instead, it had been replaced with an air of intelligence and rationality. Sam felt a spark of hope; maybe, just maybe, there was a chance that they could resolve this peacefully.

"Is that your full name?" Fury had asked. "Or would that be Samuel?"

Sam couldn't help but let out a snort of laughter at the bizarre name. A small cloud of redstone-smoke had billowed from the filter of his mouth-piece, and dissipated in the air. "My full name is Awesamdude." He replied. "But I prefer just Sam."

Fury had nodded. "Just Sam, then." He had looked up, meeting Sam's gaze. "My name is Nick Fury. I'm the commander of this organisation, known locally as SHIELD. You are currently in a country called the United States of America, on a planet named Earth."

Sam had blinked. That name, Earth- it sounded familiar. Wasn't that the name of Soot's old server?

"Where are you from?" Fury had broken through his thoughts, giving him no time to dwell on the strange coincidence. "How did you end up here?"

Alright. Now was the moment. How much information would he be willing to give? How much trust would he place in Daredevil's word? And how much damage would Fury be able to do with the knowledge, if he ended up turning against Sam and his allies?

For now, he made a decision. Tell Fury the truth. It was mostly information that he would have no difficulty in finding, after all; plenty of it was common knowledge across servers.

"Okay," He had begun, slowly. "I come from a world known as the Dream SMP." Their server broadcasts were well known. Fury would almost certainly have heard of them, at least. But to Sam's surprise, the man looked confused.

"S. M. P?" He had asked. He had pronounced the acronym awkwardly, as though it was somehow new to him. Like a different language.

Sam's eyes had widened. Surely- no, they couldn't possibly be unaware of the literal fundamental nature of their world? What kind of backwater server had Dream brought them to?"

"It's a- it's short for a Superimposed Magical Plane." He had done his best to explain it as simply as he could- just in case Fury genuinely had no idea what he was describing. "There are countless different planes that one can join, or visit, and so each one has a different name. Ours was created by our admin, Dream. He decided to name it after himself."

"Isn't Dream... I thought he was the guy you were hunting."

“Well, yes. But he’s also our server’s admin.” How much more would he need to explain?
“Back on the server, he was the only one with access to commands, which made him more powerful than anyone else. Here, he can’t use them, thank Prime- but he’s still stronger than us, since he’s also a host.”

“Interesting.” Fury had stared him down, his one good eye as sharp as a razor. “But why did you come here? And how?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m not entirely sure,” Sam had admitted. “It was Dream who set up the portal.” Only it had been DreamXD who had told him what to do. Sam and Sapnap had watched, horrified, as Dream had spoken with a voice that was not his own, ordering himself to build with some kind of obsidian- one whose blocks were shot through with cracks that bled violet tears. “The frame was common on our server- just a regular Nether portal. But the material he used was different. And when we followed him through it, we ended up here. Honestly, I doubt even he knew where it led.”

“Right. What the hell could he want with us?”

“I don’t know.” Sam had said. “He’s unpredictable. And he’s fixated on one person who he believes to be the root of the server’s problems.”

“Not- you mean the kid that you’re trying to protect?”

“Dream’s not rational. And he desperately, desperately wants to maintain control. And To- the kid- keeps getting in his way.” Sam had shook his head. “Whatever his plan is, it could destroy this server.” He had narrowed his eyes, staring straight at Fury. “He has to be stopped.”

A sudden knock on the glass of his cell broke him out of his memories. He turned around, expecting to see Fury, or perhaps one of the scientists.

His gaze met the blank, beady-eyed stare of an eerie, stark white mask, and pure shock froze him in place. Ice seemed to spread through his veins, down his spine, rendering him totally immobile.

“Hello, Sam.”

Dream’s voice was perfectly calm. He stood at ease, hands behind his back and head tilted mockingly to one side. Despite the silly smile scrawled over the mask, his presence cast a chill over the room. He laughed, quietly. “How have you been?”

Sam gasped for breath. “What- what the hell are you doing here?” He stared, disbelievingly, at his enemy. “How did you get in?”

With another careless laugh, Dream began to pace, circling the cell. “Easily,” He replied. “After all, everyone here works for me, now.”

“That’s- that’s not possible.” Sam couldn’t move, couldn’t even turn his head.

“Is it?” A faint chuckle. “Is it really?”

Dream had passed out of Sam’s line of sight, still pacing around the cage. “The people in this world aren’t like you, Sam. They won’t devote their lives to guarding one prisoner, giving themselves up to try and keep other people safe.”

The voice was growing distorted, and Sam could imagine the cruel sneer spreading across Dream’s face. “They are *weak* . And it was just so *easy* to get inside their heads.” Out of the corner of his eye, Sam watched him spreading his arms wide in triumph. “It won’t be long until I have this whole world under my thumb!”

His shout echoed through the empty room. Sam’s eyes widened; where had all the scientists gone? They had vanished, like ghosts in the light of dawn, as if they had never been there. Even George was missing from his cell.

This couldn't be real. He was wrapped in some kind of illusion, one of DreamXD's mind games. Shakily, he drew in a breath. "What do you want, Dream?"

If he let these tricks unnerve him, then he was lost.

"Oh, Sam." Dark spots began flickering into life in the corners of his eyes, crowding around the edges of his vision. "Don't disappoint me. You know exactly what I want."

The shadows spread further, devouring the pristine white walls, writhing and twisting like a knot of eels as it ate up the room. "And you know what, Sam? You're going to give it to me."

This isn't real. Only this thought kept the panic at bay as the darkness slithered nearer. Sam clenched his fists. "I'm not telling you anything." The declaration felt weak when faced with the churning shadows. "I won't let you hurt anyone else on the SMP. Not again."

"The SMP?" Dream's laugh was scornful. "It's not about the SMP, Sam. Not anymore. Haven't you noticed? I've found a much, *much* bigger playground."

"You're not an admin here, Dream." Sam said. "You don't have the power to take over."

Dream sighed disdainfully. "Don't you worry about that. Perhaps I don't have the power yet. But it's only a matter of time. I'll become the admin soon enough."

"But- not yet. You're not the admin *yet* ." Sam spoke slowly, willing the pieces to come together. "You don't have what you need, *yet* ."

His mind was racing. Dream wouldn't be able to use ordinary redstone energy sources to gain his strength; he would need code-power, divine power. DreamXD's gifts were not enough. He would need the force of another god, a new god, a mighty god. And he would need something that could control the god, something that would allow him to harness all of that divine energy.

The dots connected like lightning. A god with influence in this world; Kristin, speaking through a hunter of this world; Tommy, stolen at the first chance that Dream could get.

Sam's heart seemed to drop into his stomach. "You need Tommy." The realisation had set his hands shaking as the darkness swept across his vision. "That's why he's so important to you, even here. That's why you have to find him!"

With a roar, the room disappeared around him. The only things left were himself, and Dream-eye to eye across the endless void. And while Dream's mark was as blank and soulless as ever, Sam knew that the man beneath was furious.

Silently, Dream walked forwards. With every step, his body grew, twisting and distorting into something huge and terrible. His mask split with cracks, and his hoodie tore itself apart, revealing bloodied muscle beneath.

He reached out, and rested one clawed hand on Sam's shoulder. The great, ruined illusionary form towered above him, staring down.

"You can't stop me, Sam." Jarringly, his voice still sounded calm, almost relaxed. "Might as well give up now. I'm still feeling generous. All you have to do is give me Tommy. I'll send all of you back to the SMP, and you'll never have to see me again."

Sam set his jaw. "No. Never."

"*No?*" Dream tilted his head, heedless of the way his neck ripped open, trickling with glistening blood. He sounded genuinely wondering, as though he couldn't fathom how anyone would possibly turn down such a deal.

"I will not give you Tommy." Sam's teeth were gritted.

“But- why?” Around Dream, the empty void began to move, to swirl with some menacing force. “He’s just a nuisance! A *nobody* ! Isn’t it a fair trade? His pathetic little life for all of yours?”

The darkness began to tremble, echoing with the faint sound of a ghostly howl. It twisted and turned, lashing out with vicious, intangible blades.

“No.” Sam repeated, and the shadows cracked apart.

“You’ll regret this.” Dream warned, as the last of his body began to rent itself apart. Sam stumbled backwards, but caught himself, and stood tall. He would not give in for fear of a few nightmares and empty threats.

“You have no power over me, Dream. You never will.”

“Then *so be it* !” Dream’s voice rose to a scream, and the illusion shattered. Light poured through the fading shadows, and the blaring of alarms drowned out the roar of the void. “Have it your way.” he continued, once again unerringly calm. “I’ll just have to find him myself.”

Sam blinked the last of the darkness from his vision, and looked around frantically. The sound of the alarms was accompanied by flashing red lights, bathing the room in scarlet. The scientists were scattered on the ground like dolls, unconscious. Greying smoke drifted through the air.

His palm was aching. Sam squinted down at it, and winced; an inch-long shard of glass was half-embedded in his skin.

Something moved behind him, and he spun around, but found nothing but an empty cell. The presence rushed through the air, and he heard an echoing voice. “And when I do find him, Sam.” Dream whispered, hoarse and threatening. “I will tear the SMP to shreds before I take my throne here.”

And then he was gone, as though he had never been.

Breathing hard, Sam looked around. It was difficult to see properly in the chaos of warning lights, but he could make out his surroundings well enough. To his surprise, the bed that he had been lying on had been reduced to a mess of charred, smoking splinters. The glass barrier was shattered into glimmering fragments. He blinked. Had he done that?

“Sam!”

He startled, and glanced around.

“What the fuck!” The voice continued indignantly. Sam let out a quiet sigh of relief.

George, finally awake, had sat up in his own bed. Both of his hands were pressed to his temples, as though he was in pain. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“Yeah, ah. Sorry?”

“Where are we, anyway?” George asked, as if only just becoming aware of their bizarre surroundings.

“It doesn’t matter, George.” Sam steeled himself, and ducked out of his cell. “It’s time for us to leave.”

He had done what he could here. Despite the circumstances, he had tried to work with Fury, and cooperate with SHIELD. But now- now, he had new priorities. He had to find Tommy before Dream did.

And these humans were no help. They would only get in his way.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed!

Chapter 5

Something was afoot in the city.

Something was stirring, shifting silently beneath the surface, a shark swimming in shallow waters, just deep enough to go unseen. Forces were at work, old or new, familiar or unknown; either way- deadly dangerous.

Everyone could sense it, one way or another. The rotten stench of new arrivals had wound its way sinuously through the streets, wrapping itself around the city, reeking of mystery and change and threat. And it was leaving its mark.

Business had gone stagnant. Customers were pulling out of deals, refusing partnerships. The feeling of *unease* had permeated Hell's Kitchen, leaving everyone off balance, on edge, glancing over their shoulders at every turn. They were edging towards a precipice, the citizens of the city, and the brink was growing nearer. Nobody wanted to risk keeping close to the man most likely to give them a final shove.

Wilson Fisk stood, hands behind his back, facing the turmoil of the city that had raised him. His face was expressionless as he gazed out from the high windows of his office, lit only by the dimmed overhead lamps. In silence, he watched the flickering lights of the buildings below.

At this time of night, and from this vantage point, it looked almost beautiful.

“Boss.”

The quiet rumble of Wesley's voice would have broken him from his thoughts if they had not already been bent on his arrival.

“They're here.”

Wilson smiled.

He didn't turn to face them. Instead, he observed their reflections in the polished window glass, as though their huge forms were being superimposed over the city; his right-hand man, standing beside two of the most interesting- and dangerous- people in Hell's Kitchen.

One of them stood tall, his posture relaxed, and confident. His head was tilted arrogantly, as though this was nothing more than a game that he was sure to win, as though the city already belonged to him. Everything about him screamed power and surety, but Wilson knew better. Because nobody with true certainty in themselves needed to hide behind the silly grin of a mask.

His companion, however, appeared far more agreeable. He wore a casual hoodie adorned with a golden chain around his neck, and though he too stood with confidence, Wilson could tell that he was scanning the room, sizing him up, preparing himself for all of the potential outcomes. He was wary, alert, lacking the presumptuous surety of his companion; and he had the guts to show his face.

Wilson recognized his type. But the strange, cocky arrogance of the first was a little less familiar.

"Are you supposed to be a new vigilante?" His first question was blunt and brief; better to work out exactly who this masked man was before they got down to business. "Another pest who seems to think that they can just wave the magical hand of justice and fix this rotten place?"

The man chuckled. "No. Prime, no. I'm not a vigilante. Not trying to be a hero, either." His mask tilted forwards, and Wilson couldn't tell if he found the gesture amusing or ominous. "My name is Dream." He continued, casually. "And all I'm looking for is power. I heard that, around here, you're the one who holds it."

Well. This was new.

“Power,” Wilson replied, smiling to himself. “Foolish is the one who seeks power when he has no respect.”

“Who needs respect when you can command obedience?” The masked man, Dream, countered.

“And, pray tell,” Wilson continued, with the faintest sardonic stress on the words, “How did this pretty philosophy work out for you in your last world?”

He turned, finally, to face his opponent, and enjoyed the sudden, surprised silence. But he didn’t bother keeping him in suspense.

“Yes, I’m aware that you are a world hopper. As you said, I hold the power here. I have plenty of sources throughout the city. There’s very little happening in this place that I don’t know about.”

Wilson had the measure of this man, now. Young and arrogant he may be, but there was no doubt that he had power of his own. He would make either a very useful asset, or a truly dangerous obstacle, and this conversation balanced their future on the edge of a knife. It was time to show him a slice of his hand as Kingpin; just a nudge, to sway him in the right direction.

“But my informants don’t work for me out of fear. They do so because of their loyalty. They believe in me, and they believe in my cause, and so they work for me willingly. I have earned their respect.”

Dream tilted his head. “And what is your cause?”

Wilson stepped aside, and gestured to the window, revealing the sea of lights beyond. “To make this hell-hole a better place.” He told him. “One where everyone has the chance to live happily.”

For one long moment, Dream stared him down. And then, without warning, he burst out laughing. He wheezed like a boiling teapot, doubled over, clutching his stomach as though he had never heard a funnier joke in his life.

Out of the corner of his eye, Wilson noticed the gun that had appeared in Wesley's hand. Hastily, he raised a hand, ensuring that Dream wasn't shot there and then for his insolence.

"Do you know," Dream gasped, still cackling, "I tried to do that, too?" He seemed to be fighting to restrain himself, shaking his head and running a hand through his hair. "I built that server for everyone to have fun! We were supposed to be *happy* ! Just one big family!"

His mask had been knocked askew, Wilson realized. Somehow, the effect was unsettling, rather than comic.

"But," Dream continued, and the mirth vanished at once- as though a switch had been flicked. "They would *not- stop- fighting* ! They wanted more, all of them, *always more* , grabbing at my territory, stealing from each other, and they killed people who tried to stop them!" He was breathing hard now. "I had to end it. I had no choice"

With a *snap* like breaking bones, the wobbly, closed smile of the mask split open into a wide grin. Wilson's eyes narrowed. Overhead, the lamps began to flicker wildly, and there was a quiet hiss as one of the bulbs flashed and died.

" *So I stopped it.* " Dream whispered, in a voice that was deep and hollow. "*I made a deal. He took my weaknesses, and he replaced them with power.*"

Around the scribbled circle of his eye, a crack cut through the white porcelain of the mask. It fractured, and spread, warping across his face, until a great X had split apart above his mouth.

" *And he can do the same for you .* " The voice, too, had fragmented, and multiplied, as though many people were speaking at once, jarringly out of time. "*If you take the deal .*"

He reached out one hand, palm open. Kingpin stared at it dispassionately, a slight furrow between his brows. So. The man was more dangerous than he had thought. Better to strike now, instead of humoring it; that would get them nowhere.

“You’re mad.” He said, calmly. “You can’t have power without weakness. It would be like having the sky without the earth.” Staring him down, Wilson folded his arms. “It would be useless.”

The thing before him grinned hideously. No trace of the man remained; all that was left was the monster that had stolen his form. It tilted its head, considering his words, clearly thinking hard. “ *We’ll see, Kingpin. My offer still stands, if you are to change your mind.* ”

And with a nasty *crunch* , the cracks retracted. The mask sealed itself shut, and it was Dream who stared at him once again, through the blank, beady eye holes.

“Now,” He said as if nothing had happened. “To the real business at hand.” He, in turn, folded his arms, and Wilson could tell that he was smiling. “I’m looking for someone. And I was hoping that you could help me find him.”

Tubbo stood firm, hands wrapped around Technoblade’s discarded crossbow and finger poised on the trigger. He glared down at the three kidnappers and felt a trickle of raindrops run down his cheek.

He had always wondered what it would feel like to be on the other end of this thing. To feel the weight of the polished wood and the tension in the string, to smell the gunpowder and parchment of the rocket. It was this weapon that had stolen his life, left him shattered and bleeding on the ground, and traced a great spill of burns across his face. He knew its capabilities better than most.

To his surprise, though, even as he leveled the crossbow at his hostage’s face, he found that very little had changed. He didn’t feel especially powerful, or confident, despite having

control of such a ruthless weapon. The sudden urge to shoot, to leave another person broken on the ground, did not possess him.

It was just a weapon, after all. How it was used, he supposed grimly, was up to him. And, deep down in his heart, Tubbo knew full well that he did not want to shoot a person who stood unarmed before him; especially when the shot would likely kill them in one hit.

Unfortunately, the guy with the eyepatch- the man who had declared himself the leader- seemed to know this. Though his hands were raised in surrender, his expression was calm and unafraid. He met Tubbo's glare with his own steady gaze; more curious than scared.

He had restrained his two underlings, as well. As Ranboo had approached, sword in hand, Eyepatch had flung out an arm to shove his fellows back. And a moment later, at his command, both had dropped their strange, useless-looking weapons to the rain-washed ground. They had barely even protested.

The scary woman had glared daggers at Eyepatch, even as she followed his orders.

Now, Ranboo had pulled several loops of cobweb from his inventory. He flung them around their enemies, tying them down with the sticky silk.

"Look," Eyepatch said, still far too composed for a man wrapped in spiderweb. "I don't want to fight you."

Tubbo tilted his head; deeply mistrustful, as ever, but- he had been a politician, after all. He knew full well the importance of communication, even in a situation as bizarre as this.

"But I do have a few questions." Eyepatch continued. "Will you answer me?"

"Why should I?"

Eyepatch stared him down. "Because," he replied, his gaze sharp and calculating, "I'm still hoping that we can resolve this peacefully."

To Tubbo's surprise, the man looked sincere- as though he truly meant what he was saying. But that meant nothing, really. He knew how easy it was to mimic an air of earnest honesty.

And Dream was a master of illusory tricks. He wasn't about to fall headlong into one of his traps.

Shoulders squared, Tubbo leveled the crossbow. "Alright then." He glared right back at Eyepatch. "Give Tommy back to me, and we'll talk."

"Tommy?" The man actually looked confused, his brow furrowing. "Who-"

He was cut off abruptly by the sound of a scream. Horror shot down Tubbo's spine, and he whirled around. *Niki* .

His eyes widened as he took in the scene before him; the lightning summoner, the one with the hammer, had evidently been trying to take on both Techno and Niki at once. And he would undoubtedly have failed utterly, only- only something had gone horribly wrong.

The man with the hammer had slammed Niki aside with brutal force, and had turned on-

Technoblade was on his knees, hand pressed to his face, a torrent of blood gushing down his face.

There was an arrow sticking out of his face.

On any other day, Tubbo thought, he would have looked upon the scene with different eyes. He would have grinned with vindictive pleasure, laughed at the sight of his tormentor pinned helplessly to the ground. " *Oh, how the mighty have fallen.* "

But now?

Now, they were fighting in a hardcore world. Now, Techno wouldn't be able to respawn.

And now, Tubbo realized grimly, he needed him. Would they be able to save Tommy without The Blade?

I- I hope this one ends a bit differently, Techno had said, quietly, back in a soul-fire-lit room, stowing a shulker box safely into his inventory.

Me too , Tubbo had replied.

It was time to make good on that promise.

"Boo," he said, rapid but calm. "Go and take care of that archer, alright?" He could see Ranboo snapping out of his shock, turning to spot their enemy. "I'll deal with this."

And as Ranboo narrowed his eyes, and disappeared in a *puff* of particles, Tubbo began to run, raising the crossbow high.

Everything seemed to go very slowly.

Techno's totem erupted in an explosion of green and gold. Out of the corner of his eye, Tubbo saw Niki blur past, a heartbeat too late to stop their foe, who raised the hammer high into the air.

His heart lurched and he gritted his teeth and wrapped his finger around the trigger and *fired* -

The *bang* of the rocket rang out around them, and triumph sang in his chest. He could feel a wild grin tugging at his lips, and, as the lightning summoner fell back, Tubbo shouted the first words that sprang to mind.

One of Techno's old prayers, a good-luck charm, a plea for fortune from the great goddess of Channel, twin to their own Prime. *Subscribe to Technoblade!*

The blood roared in his ears as Techno rose, once again, to his feet, sword gleaming with a vicious menace.

Things were about to get serious.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Queens, a high-school teenager couldn't sit still.

Peter Parker was by no means an ordinary teenager, of course- but this was unusual. Even for him.

His problems had begun at roughly half-past seven that morning, when he had awoken to find himself pleasantly well-rested. The night had been quiet, still, totally undisturbed by the activity of petty criminals, and this was very unusual indeed.

He had got up as normal, left the house early, and- to his surprise- made it to school on time. No storefront robberies or bag snatches for him to intervene in. The city was utterly peaceful.

It was making him restless. The calm was too sudden, too perfect; too similar to the unexpected stillness that precedes a hurricane. Something was wrong.

And then he had heard the news of the boiler explosion.

Peter wasn't stupid. The sudden absence of the criminal underground occurring on the same night as a mysterious, unidentifiable boiler explosion was no coincidence. The situation reeked of a SHIELD coverup.

Two hours later, the Avengers were sighted at the scene, neatly confirming Peter's suspicions.

They hadn't called him in, though.

He tried to pretend that it didn't sting. After all, wasn't he supposed to be one of them? What would he have to do before they stopped seeing him as nothing more than a reckless teenager who happened- on occasion- to be a useful asset?

Well. He wasn't going to let them get away with this. He'd show them his worth. They needed him; they just- *somehow* - hadn't realized it.

But he had to be subtle about it. If he timed it wrong, then he would be no help to them whatsoever. He had to be careful; join the fight when he would be most necessary, do his best not to get himself too badly hurt, and, just maybe, save the day.

Anticipation shot through his veins, and he fought to keep himself relatively still. He had only five minutes of class left, and he jittered restlessly in place until the sweet sound of the bell finally released him.

He was concealed in a back alley and throwing on his suit and mask before he had the chance to reconsider the wisdom of his hasty plans.

They might have had a very good reason not to call .

Or perhaps they really did see him as a tool, to be used when it suited them and abandoned in a drawer when it didn't.

Peter had never really believed in silly stories of angels and devils on shoulders. Not until now, anyway.

Either way, he had to go and find out what was happening. If they truly did need his help, then he would step in, right? That was his job, after all. And if not- well, they wouldn't need to know that he had gone in the first place.

Now fully justified, he zipped up his backpack and webbed it safely to the back of the nearest rubbish bin. A second later, he was hurtling over the rooftops.

It didn't take him long to reach the scene. The "boiler explosion" had left the nearby buildings in shambles; some were half caved in, while others were left with crumbling holes in their walls. Traces of smoke still filled the air.

The whole area was heavily guarded by SHIELD agents, all disguised in ordinary police uniforms. By now, though, Peter doubted that the desperate act was fooling anyone.

They had secured the perimeter, pushing back the civilians and the small army of reporters. Fortunately, there was very little that they could do to restrain a super-powered teenager, and Peter slipped past them effortlessly.

The whole block had been evacuated, he realized; the streets before him were completely empty. Silently, he swung through them and found the fight within seconds.

He skidded to a halt at the edge of a rooftop, heart racing, and stared down at the battle.

Down in the depths of a rain-slicked alleyway, Thor was locked in combat against two-people? Aliens? Against two beings with bright pink hair and odd, purplish armor. Lightning crackled around them, though it seemed to have no effect on any of the fighters.

To their left, another invader was holding Fury and two agents captive, holding what looked like some kind of medieval crossbow.

A *crash* sounded on the rooftop across from him, and he looked up to see Hawkeye facing off with another armored being, who must have stood at least four feet taller than him.

Falcon and Iron Man were nowhere to be seen, though Peter was certain that they had been named on the news. His heart plummeted. If Mr. Stark had been hurt, or worse...

Either way, the situation was evidently not *under control* . They needed him.

Half a second before he lunged down towards Thor, his spider-sense sparked to life. On pure instinct, he dove out of the way as two people hurled past him from the skies.

Great metallic wings rippled back and forth, desperately trying to hold their owner aloft, and Peter recognized Falcon twisting through the air. He was thrashing in the relentless hold of another being, who also bore immense black wings- only his looked *organic* , as though he had been born for flight.

Peter stared in horror as the alien dragged Falcon higher and higher, ripping and tearing at the ruin of the metal wings. Glimmering shards of feathers and gears rained down, and the wings themselves fluttered frantically as they were rent apart.

Falcon shouted in panic, fighting desperately to throw his enemy off, but the alien clung on grimly. With a horrific screech of shattered metal, the right wing sheared off entirely, clamped in the being's iron grip.

Almost carelessly, the alien tossed the wing aside, and Peter watched in shock as it tumbled limply to earth.

And then the alien hurled Falcon after it.

Peter's heart stopped as Sam fell, his last wing twisting uselessly as the howling wind drew a scream from his lungs. He plummeted wildly towards the rigid concrete with nothing but empty air to break his fall. His arms were flung wide, as if to form his own wings, to carry himself back into the sky with hope alone.

The sight was enough to break Peter from his shock. Without thinking, without a moment of hesitation, he lunged forwards and flung out his wrist, snapping out a great thread of webbing.

It was time for Spider-Man to save the day.

Sam's scream was cut short as he crashed into the center of the great web. It stretched and tangled, leaving him caught like a fly, flailing, swearing, and still thirty feet off the ground. But he was alive.

High above, the being hadn't watched Falcon's fall. He had folded back his wings and was arcing towards the opposite rooftop, where Hawkeye was facing off against another offworlder.

Adrenaline flooding his veins, Peter spun with the momentum of his swing, flipping in mid-air as he dropped into the alleyway below. Silently, he soared above Thor and his attackers, narrowing his eyes as he took in the scene.

The god of thunder was struggling. Though he had evidently managed to badly injure one of his enemies- judging by the sheer amount of blood that coated one side of the alien's boar-skull mask- the god's movements were slowing, his hammer strikes growing weaker. Blood was dripping from three deep stab wounds on his side.

And to make the situation worse, the third being, shorter than the others but wielding that lethal-looking crossbow, had joined the fight.

The explosions of his rockets had left gunpowder starbursts across the walls, and a great burn now covered the right side of Thor's chestplate. The offworlder raised the weapon again, rocket loaded and primed to fire, and Peter seized his chance.

He braced himself against the bricks a few meters above the alien's head and flicked out a wrist.

His webs wrapped around the handle of the crossbow, and, with a sharp tug, he yanked it from the being's grip. "I'll take that, thank you!"

"Hey!" The alien's head flicked up to stare at him. His expression was an amusing mixture of shock, anger, and pure indignation. "Give that back!"

At least they spoke English, Peter thought with relief. "Only if you promise not to shoot anyone with it!" He called down, safely out of the offworlder's reach.

A half-smile tugged at the alien's lips. "Sure thing, boss man!" He reached up, making grabbing motions for the weapon.

Peter couldn't help giving a small smile in return. "Somehow, I don't quite believe that." Effortlessly, he webbed the crossbow to the wall and dropped to the ground.

"Ah well." The offworlder shrugged, and, without warning, pulled a huge axe from thin air. "Worth a shot, I guess."

Peter's eyes widened at the sight of the weapon. Where on earth had *that* been stored? There was no way-

His thoughts were cut off abruptly as he was forced to duck beneath the first swing of the axe. The alien's brow was furrowed with concentration, teeth gritted as he raised the blade again. His purple armor rippled with light, and the rainwater that ran down it in little rivulets, and Peter thought, suddenly, that he really didn't want to hurt him.

Hastily, he activated his web-slingers once again. The synthetic silk wrapped around the alien's arm, and spread across his torso, pinning him to the ground. The axe clattered to the concrete, the blade dulled with webs.

Looking furious, the being opened his mouth, and yelled, "Ran-"

But before he could complete the word, Peter had webbed his mouth, too, muffling the shout. The alien glared at him, and he couldn't help feeling a twinge of guilt at the sight.

Now that he looked closer, he could see that the alien wasn't just small. He looked young, too, behind the armor and the weapons. In fact, he suspected that they might be around the same age. What kind of world could this being have come from, he wondered, that had left a teenager with such terrible scars across his face- or sent him into battle against superpowered enemies?

Peter's guilt was worsening, and he tried to force it aside. He hadn't hurt the alien, after all, and he couldn't just let it alert its allies. And besides, the battle wasn't over yet.

"I'm sorry," He said, quietly, and turned away. Without another word, he hurried to free Fury and his agents.

"Are you alright?" To his surprise, the three were immobilized with what appeared to be his own webs, only- these were different. It felt almost like *real* spider silk. But whatever had spun these webs must be twenty, thirty times the size of an ordinary spider. Peter's curiosity was burning like a wildfire, but he had no time to dwell on it now.

He split the webs surrounding Fury with ease, yanked them away from him, and asked, "Is anyone hurt?"

“Spider-Man?” Despite his scowl, Fury sounded more relieved than angry. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Just looked like you needed a hand, sir!”

“Right.” Fury pulled a small knife from his jacket and turned to the webs binding one of his agents. “We’re fine, but Stark is down. Got hit by lightning and hasn’t moved since.” The knife tore through the first strand of silk with a faint *snap*. “Find him, and get him to safety.”

Peter didn’t need telling twice. Leaving Fury to free the other agent, he leaped away, scanning the rubble strewn across the alleyway. “Mr. Stark?”

A flash of scarlet caught his eye, and he sprinted towards it. There, in the midst of a heap of scorched bricks, Peter could see the gleam of the Iron Man suit; crumpled and broken, carved open like a tin of tomatoes. His blood ran cold. “Oh, god.”

With two rapid steps, he hurdled up the pile of bricks and knelt beside the still form, afraid that the arc reactor might be damaged. “Please don’t be dead, god, please don’t be dead, *please ...*”

But- to Peter’s immense relief- he was still breathing. There was a nasty wound on his shoulder, and the right side of the suit had been half-crushed, but- at least the reactor still looked functional.

Fury had said that Stark had been hit by *lightning*. Only- he was sure that Mr. Stark had built anti EMP measures into the suit? Peter frowned as he examined the damage, trying to assess the situation. Whatever had struck him earlier had cracked the suit open, that much was obvious. And if the thunderbolt had hit that precise spot, then it could have fried the inner frame, turning the whole suit into a very expensive piece of scrap metal.

Either way, the frame should have conducted most of the electricity away from Mr. Stark himself. That was something, at least. Now, all Peter had to do was get him to safety.

As quickly and gently as he could, he secured Mr. Stark's arm to his chest, making sure that it wouldn't be injured further by the movement. Fortunately, the synthetic silk made for an excellent sling.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, the frozen suit was *heavy* and lifting it felt damn near impossible. Instead, Peter webbed a few loops of silk around the iron chest piece and- as carefully as he could- dragged him toward a tiny side road. There, at least, he would be shielded from the worst of the battle.

A trail of scattered blood droplets followed them into the shelter of the side road, leaking from the deep stab wound in Mr. Stark's shoulder. Peter winced at the sight of it as he propped him cautiously against a low wall.

Just before he could try to use his webs as an emergency bandage, Mr. Stark gasped, and his eyes shot open. "*Parker* ?"

It seemed to take him a moment to orient himself, and he struggled to sit up. Pressing his uninjured hand to his forehead, Mr. Stark stared at him with an expression of growing horror. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Uh oh. Peter did his best to grin, and quipped, "Um- saving your ass?"

"God, kid, look-" Stark gritted his teeth, obviously in pain. "Get *out* of here! I'm serious, these people aren't messing around!"

I'm not exactly messing around either , Peter thought, mutinously. "I know, sir- but- you guys-"

"Are adults who have made their own decisions!" Mr. Stark cut him off. "You are a kid, and you need to get the hell out of here. The real reinforcements are on their way."

Well. Peter wasn't going to pretend that *that* didn't hurt.

He blinked in bewilderment. Did Mr. Stark really believe him to be that useless? *Just a kid* ? Unless- was he saying that to try and force him to leave, to escape to safety?

Either way, it wasn't going to work. Not while his allies were still in danger. Reckless teenager he may be, but his choices were his own. And he had absolutely no intention of abandoning this fight.

"So," He replied cheerfully, casually activating his web-slingers. "All I have to do is keep you alive 'til the real reinforcements get here?" And before Stark could say another word, he flicked out his wrist. "Got it!"

And he was gone, swooping out of the side road, back towards the raging battle.

Ranboo stared around, eyes slit, frantically searching the rooftops for the mysterious archer who had nearly killed Techno. It was no good; the buildings were so tall that it was impossible to make out anything on their roofs.

Gritting his teeth, he tried to force the panic aside. Instead of tracking the archer directly, he followed the trail that the arrow must have taken, reversing its flight in his mind's eye, up and up until- there. Bracing himself, he teleported, right to the spot where it should have been released, hoping against hope that he would find his target.

And, to his horror, he did.

Barely six feet away, a man was perched on the ledge, a fresh arrow nocked in his bow, taking careful aim. He was a heartbeat away from letting it fly, arcing down through the air until it found its mark in Niki's throat.

There was no time to think, to prepare.

Ranboo had to protect his friend. Whatever the cost.

Sword gleaming, he lunged.

Somehow, the guy sensed that something was amiss. Without hesitation, he ducked, rolling under the sweep of Ranboo's blade and regaining his feet in seconds. Ranboo spun out of balance, stumbling backward to try to catch himself, and cursed under his breath.

That had been a rookie mistake. He was supposed to be long past these simple errors- and in a real fight, no less! *Keep your stance wide, keep your body low.* Techno had taught him better!

He did his best to correct his stance and gripped the handle of the sword tighter. But everything was slick with rainwater, and his hands were slippery from sweat.

Before his enemy could rise, he swung again, aiming for his head. But he was off by a mile, and the blade whistled uselessly through empty air, almost throwing off his balance once again.

What was wrong with him? This man had nearly killed Techno! And Niki could have been next! What had he been training for, if not to protect the people that he loved? But now, as he stood between his friends and this deadly threat, he found that his hands were shaking.

Raising the sword defensively, he fought to steady his breathing.

Observe your opponent, Techno said quietly in his mind, reaching out to correct his grip. *Read the situation. They'll tell you their next move, just by the way that they position themselves.*

Ranboo swallowed, and then he did just that. Deliberately, he scanned the archer before him, seeking out extra weapons or concealed tools, studying his coiled form. As well as the vicious-looking composite bow, the man had at least three knives stashed in his tunic, ready for a close-range fight. In this, then, Ranboo held the upper hand; the reach of his sword was far greater than that of his opponent.

He had the advantage. All he had to do was ensure that his foe was kept at the right distance- not too near, not too far- and he was almost guaranteed a victory.

Only the archer wasn't positioned to attack. Instead, he was keeping low to the ground, prepared to evade a sword swing or use his bow to parry.

What was he doing? This wasn't right. Ranboo had to stay on high alert.

And then- to his shock- the man spoke.

"What's the paint for?"

His tone was casual, almost cheerful, as he continued, "War paint? Is it some kind of Braveheart cosplay?" He tilted his head curiously. "You guys here for the convention?"

Utterly thrown, Ranboo stared at him. "Wh- *what*?" This was not an aspect of battle that he had trained for. What are you supposed to do when your enemy starts up a pleasant conversation? "What are you talking about?"

The man looked at him. His expression was thoughtful, and a little sad. "You look like a warrior," He said, "But you don't act like one." Some of the tension faded from his shoulders. "You don't really want to do this, do you?"

“I-” Ranboo hesitated his mind in turmoil. “No, I- I don’t. But I don’t really have a choice.” It felt almost shameful to admit, as though he was exposing some private weakness within him.

“Is that what they’re telling you?” The archer asked, surprisingly gently. His stance was growing more relaxed by the moment. “That you have to fight? Are they forcing you?”

“No! No, definitely not- I...”

I’m here because it’s the right thing to do. I’m here because, ultimately, I made my choice. And I may be a coward, but I know why I make my decisions.

Ranboo glared at the archer, jaw set. “I choose people. Not sides. And I fight for Tommy because he’s my friend!”

“Who’s Tommy?” Suddenly, the archer looked concerned. “Is he the guy with the skull down there?”

“What? N-no, you- you took him! You’re working for Dream!” The man wasn’t making sense, Ranboo thought with frustration. Was he trying to distract him? Get in his head, catch him off guard?”

It was the archer’s turn to look bewildered. “What? Who’s Dream?”

.

He was playing dumb, then. Unless- a sudden, horrible thought sent a shiver trickling down Ranboo’s spine.

Unless he was already under Dream’s control. Unless he, too, had that whispery voice threading through his mind, wrapping around his bones, tugging him this way and that. Perhaps the archer would awake, hours later, with blood-soaked hands and fresh scars and without the faintest memories of the past night. Maybe he would panic at the sight, run for his hidden obsidian room, frantically scribble in a book of scattered memories and try to work out just how much damage he had been forced to do.

Ranboo felt sick. If that truly was the case, then there was no point in trying to reason with him. He would have to defeat him- for both their sakes.

“I’m not going to fall for that!” He hissed, hoping that the anger in his voice would drown out the fear. “No more talking! No more of your tricks!”

This was the only way. One clean fight, and, with any luck, they could both escape with their lives. If not, well... He would have done what he had to do. His friends would be safe. He clenched the handle of the sword and raised it high, and this time, he would not miss.

And then the archer dropped his weapons.

With a quiet clatter, the bow tumbled to the ground, quickly followed by the knives. They lay there on the rain-soaked rooftop, perfectly still. An air of finality, of a silent decision, hung over them like a soft shroud.

Hands empty, and raised high in surrender, the man stood before him and looked him straight in the eye.

“I’m not going to force you to fight,” He said, calmly. “I just want to talk. Will you tell me your name?”

Ranboo froze.

Prime. What the hell was he supposed to do now? Why was his foe being so- so bizarrely *kind* ? What kind of game was he playing here?

Whatever it was *had* to be Dream’s work. He couldn’t fall for it, not now. He had to *think* . What would Techno do in a situation like this?”

“P- Pick up your weapon, uh- nerd, the- the time for talking is over!”

The moment the words had fallen from his lips, he almost cringed with shame. How had he managed to butcher the line so entirely? Prime, this was why Techno was the real fighter here; he would never have stammered with such awkwardness. He felt so embarrassed that he had to stop himself from zipping away to pick up a grass block.

It was at that moment that, with an echoing hawk scream, Phil swooped down from the skies like some great avenging angel. He dropped onto the rooftop, directly between Ranboo and the archer, and spread his wings wide to shield him. With a sweep of shining purple, he drew his katana, already poised for the battle.

Ranboo could have cried with relief at being spared further embarrassment. With a low warble, he ducked gratefully behind the wall of feathers, content to remain hidden for a moment. The archer, for his part, scrambled to regain his weapons and braced himself with a knife in each hand.

“Are you alright, Ranboo?” Phil had glanced over his shoulder, checking him hastily for injuries. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine, I- uh, just-” He trailed off, and straightened his shoulders. Unfortunately, that brought his head above Phil’s wingtips, and he ducked back down, still too embarrassed to face the archer.

“It’s alright, mate, I’ll take it from here.” Phil turned back to face his enemy, giving the katana a neat flick. “You get back down, see if Techno needs help.”

With a nod, Ranboo backed away, staring down into the street, looking for a safe spot to teleport. But before he could gather his focus, he spotted something.

A red-and-blue figure was scaling the building, inhumanly fast, using white threads to hoist itself higher. It was heading for their rooftop, and Phil- distracted by his foe- had not noticed it.

“So,” The archer was saying. His air of calm had vanished, replaced by a scowl. “You’re the bastards using kids to fight your battles for you?”

“Bruh.” Phil glared right back, his tone faintly mocking. “You’re the ones who literally kidnapped a child, the fuck are you on about?” Raising his sword, he took a step forward. “And give us *some* credit, we *tried* to keep the kids out of it!”

And he swung the sword. The archer leaped out of the way, and the blade missed him by a hair’s breadth. Without breaking the motion, Phil swept the blade back, and- at the last second- the archer managed to parry with one of his daggers, knocking the sword aside and driving his other knife towards Phil’s heart. With a neat spin, the avian avoided the blow, and went back on the offensive, keeping his enemy back with rapid sword strokes.

But the newcomer was approaching rapidly, and Phil still didn’t know. Ranboo had to warn him, and fast.

“Phil!” He shouted, breaking into a sprint as he raced back towards the fight. “ *Phil* , behind you!”

He was a heartbeat too late. The figure had reached the rooftop and flung out an arm. Some kind of projectile was hurtling through the air, straight towards the avian’s back, and Ranboo had run out of time to hesitate.

Perhaps he couldn’t kill for his friends. Perhaps he wasn’t even able to fight this battle for them.

But he couldn’t let that stop him from protecting them.

With a gasp, he clenched his fists, concentrated harder than he had ever done in his life, and then he *moved* .

The teleport took him only a few feet forward. It was all he needed. There was no time to knock Phil out of the way.

But it wouldn't matter if the projectile never reached him in the first place.

Whatever it was struck him with enough force to knock him backward, sending him crashing to the ground beside Phil. His head hit the ground and he squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the pain of an arrow in his chest or a harming potion sinking through his skin. Prime, he hoped that whatever it was wasn't lethal.

But what followed, to his surprise, felt more like one of Tubbo's tight hugs. Forcing his eyes open, he looked down, only to find that his arms had been pinned to his sides with what appeared to be cobwebs. They had wrapped around his entire torso, holding him immobile, tougher, and more resistant than ordinary webs. Where the hell did they get *this* from?

"What the fuck-" Phil shoved the archer back and whirled to face Ranboo. His eyes widened in dismay, and he knelt down to scoop him into his arms. Rapidly, he straightened up and leaped into the air, beating his wings to launch them both toward the other side of the rooftop. They alighted gently a second later, now with both enemies in sight, and Phil set Ranboo carefully back on his feet. "Where the hell did this guy come from?"

"Hey there!"

The cheerful shout rang out across the roof, and the newcomer gave a small wave. Ranboo stared at it with growing horror, taking in the strange patterns across its skin, the large, insect-like eyes, and the webs that had shot from its wrists.

"Oh, *Prime*," He whispered, with a shudder of recognition. "The Cum Spider." Tommy had been telling the truth all along, and Ranboo hadn't believed him, hadn't listened...

"*What ?*" The figure shrieked back, sounding offended. "I'm Spider-Man, not- not whatever you just called me!"

Phil laughed coldly, and Ranboo could tell that he was staring straight at the archer. “So,” He called, ignoring the indignant huff of the Spider-Man. “Here you were, trying to make *me* the villain for fighting alongside a child!”

He has a point, Ranboo thought. Spider-Man, whoever he was, really had sounded young.

“I’m not-” With a cough, Spider-Man deepened his voice, squaring his shoulders. “I mean, I’m not a kid! I’m an adult! Tell ‘em, Hawkeye!”

Ranboo couldn’t resist a snort. That had sounded too much like Tommy not to be funny.

“Look-” The archer scowled at his spider-ally. “I’m not- he wasn’t *supposed* to be here.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m sure!” Phil’s voice dripped with sardonic sarcasm as he nocked another arrow to his bow.

“Hey!” Evidently, Spider kid wasn’t prepared to give up the argument so readily. “You guys should be glad I came!” He folded his arms, and Ranboo could tell that he was glaring at the archer. “Falcon over there would have been a *pancake* right now, and you and Thor *both* look like you could use the help!”

Ranboo almost felt sorry for the archer. Briefly, he closed his eyes in frustration, and then grumbled, “Just... help me restrain these two, alright? And *try* not to get hurt?” With a swift motion, he pulled back his bowstring, arrow at the ready.

“Now we’re talking!” Spider kid chirped.

And the fight was on.

Quickly, Ranboo tried to teleport out of the webs that bound him. Unfortunately, the silk was sticky, and it clung to him like some inescapable net. Great. He changed tactics, forcing his

arm out as far as he could get it, and using his claws to tear at the strings. It wasn't long before he had managed to shred through the web, leaving his fingertips wrapped with silk. He used his sword to slash through the rest of the stuff before lunging back into the battle.

Phil had spread his wings to their fullest extent, and was leading the two in an intricate dance, pushing them neatly away with great walls of feathers before turning on them with a fast-flying arrow or great slash with the sword. Unfortunately, both the archer and the spider guy were quick on their feet, effortlessly evading each attack. Phil couldn't keep it up forever, and Ranboo hurried to help him as best as he could.

"Hey!" He shouted, trying to catch spider kid's attention and draw him away from Phil. But before he was near enough, everything went horribly wrong.

The archer had withdrawn a new arrow, banded with yellow stripes, and had released it- not toward Phil- but toward the ground at his feet. It lodged harmlessly in the concrete, and Phil glanced down with confusion. Instinctively, Ranboo tracked it with his eyes, which meant that he was staring directly at it when it suddenly exploded in a burst of blinding white light.

With a cry of shock, he stumbled backward, blinking the stars from his eyes. The flash of light had caught them both totally off guard; after all, what kind of arrow erupts with *light* instead of flames or potion effects?

Blurrily, he watched as a web caught Phil full in the chest, sending him reeling backward as it spread across the expanse of his wings. The avian twisted frantically, fighting blindly to throw the webs *off*, and Ranboo gasped in horror as he lost his balance.

The edge of the rooftop was too close. Phil stumbled, still struggling to tear his way free of the cobwebs, and then suddenly there was nothing but empty air below him.

And, with a scream of pure *panic*, Phil fell.

No. No. *Nonono*. Ranboo didn't stop to think. In the blink of an eye, he was gone, leaving nothing but a few wisps of purple in his wake. Then, in a rush of howling wind, he was tumbling through the air, barely inches away from Phil. He seized the stricken avian by the

shoulders, but just before he could force his exhausted body to teleport just one more time, they came to an abrupt halt.

Five feet below, the ground swayed sickeningly.

Another web had caught them, with a heartbeat to spare. Ranboo glanced up to see spider kid swinging down towards them, wrist outstretched. *Prime* . The guy had just saved both their skins, that much was almost certain. *Why had he done that?*

Ranboo couldn't dwell on it. Beside him, Phil had begun to twist and struggle, cursing furiously, his breath fast and shallow. "Fuck. *Fuck* . Can you get us out of h-here?"

"I- I can try." His head was swimming with blood rush, but he did his best to gather his scattered focus. Gritting his teeth, he squeezed his eyes shut, and then he teleported once again.

He knew as soon as he vanished that it hadn't worked.

His body reformed, back on the rooftop, but Phil was not with him. With a surge of guilt, Ranboo thought of him trapped in those awful webs, left down in the alley.

A moment later, he remembered that he had another problem to deal with.

Slowly, he turned on the spot, until he was facing the only other person still standing on the roof.

"Hey," The archer said, raising a hand in greeting. "You gonna call me a nerd again?"

Alright , Peter thought grimly. *They really don't want me here.*

He should have guessed that they would think that the situation was too dangerous for him. But still- he wasn't a child anymore, and they couldn't keep treating him like one forever. Okay, perhaps he wasn't technically an adult. But he was old enough to make his own decisions, and he was strong enough to handle himself. For god's sake, he'd fought Captain America, hadn't he?

Either way, he was here now. And he was going to save them, whether they liked it or not.

He left the birdman hanging safely upside-down, like some bizarre butterfly wrapped in a cocoon- albeit one that was swearing furiously and flailing around. The other alien, the tall one, had disappeared, presumably back up to the rooftop, but he trusted Hawkeye to deal with it on his own.

Instead, he swung back down into the alleyway, flipped around in mid-air, and landed weightlessly beside Thor.

The opponents had backed off for the moment, catching their breaths, pacing a slow circle around each other, their weapons at the ready. The woman was spinning her trident effortlessly in one hand.

Thor glanced at him with a moment of surprise. "Hello, little spider. Here to join the fight?" He nodded briefly in the direction of the offworlders. "Be careful with that one-" Indicating the man in the boar skull, he narrowed his eyes. "His strength is equal to my own. And that woman can channel lightning through that fork of hers."

Peter frowned. "Uh- isn't it called a trident?"

"Sure." Thor gazed back at their enemies. "The trident fork."

The offworlders were growing tense, readying themselves to leap back into battle. Their time was running out. Peter activated his web-slingers, and asked hastily, “So? What’s the plan?”

“The plan is simple, little spider,” Thor announced. “We *fight*, fight with all we have. And, once the battle is won, one of us will have risen to the halls of Valhalla, and the other shall take the glory here on Earth.”

“Uh- okay...” Peter shifted on the spot. “New plan. I’ll distract the pig guy while you deal with trident woman, and once she’s down you come and help me, alright?”

“Wait- little spider-” Thor began, but their time was up. Peter stopped listening and charged.

He had hoped that boar guy would be slower, easier to distract; he was built like a small mountain, after all. And Thor, unlike him, could probably deal with a thunderbolt with ease- it wouldn’t take him long to defeat trident woman. The plan was foolproof.

He darted around boar guy, keeping a wide berth, and tossed a web towards him. “What’s up with the Kimetsu no Yaiba cosplay?”

Apparently, disappointingly, the tease was lost on the alien. Well, it wasn’t all that likely that they had anime in space. Fortunately, boar guy didn’t need much baiting; he ducked beneath the web with ease and turned to fight him without much complaint.

He was faster than he had any right to be, Peter thought with frustration, given how heavy all that armor must be. But he dodged the webs with surprising agility, using his battleax to slash them from the air, and then making rapid swings for Peter’s head.

Peter was, at least, much quicker. He wove around, ducking and dodging to avoid the gleaming axe, though his escapes were far narrower than he would have liked.

Trying to keep calm, he ran through the strategy. Thor would be here any minute now. All he had to do was concentrate, regulate his breathing, and use all his senses to the fullest. *Trust*

your- your Peter-tingle . He was so caught up in the fight, he realized, that he didn't even have time to quip.

It wasn't long before they fell into a rhythm; a strange dance of flying cobwebs and shining axe strikes, whirling and diving to avoid being hit. Peter tried to catch glances at Thor, but every time he looked, the flashes of lightning and flurry of movement made it impossible to tell who held the upper hand.

He looked back in time to roll beneath the blade of the axe, springing lightly back to his feet. But before he could take another step, the axe itself just- *vanished* . Into thin air.

With a spark of recollection, Peter remembered the other alien, the short one, doing something similar; reaching out into empty space and dragging a huge weapon from nowhere. But now, in the middle of combat, the move caught him off guard.

He had allowed himself to grow used to the pattern, and the totally unexpected disappearance of his enemy's axe left him reeling in shock.

And before he knew it, boar guy's fist was crashing against his skull.

Stunned, ears ringing, he fell back, only to take another heavy punch to the stomach. The reinforced suit was only so resistant, and the pain of the blow rippled through his nerves. A third strike sent him to the ground, shuddering, barely able to raise his arms to defend himself.

From there, the hits came in hard and fast, breaking against his torso, his arms, and his ribs, not giving him a single second to recover.

Panicking, with black spots drifting across his vision, Peter fought to get away. On pure instinct, he flung out a web, dragging himself desperately away from boar guy. As soon as he was out of reach, he staggered to his feet and doubled over. Tearing the mask away from his mouth, he retched, guts aching as the contents of his stomach spilled out over the ground before him.

But boar guy refused to leave him alone. Silently, he grabbed Peter by the neck with one hand, lifted him high into the air, and slammed him against the nearest wall. With a flick of his other hand, he summoned the axe, then brought it down, terrifyingly close to his face. The edge of the blade was gleaming hungrily, razor-sharp and deadly, and the sight sent uncontrollable fear rushing through Peter's mind. He struggled to free himself, twisting this way and that, but boar guy's grip felt as though it was made of iron.

“ *Wait,* ” He gasped, fighting to avoid that lethal blade. “Wait, *please* -”

To his surprise, boar guy paused. His head tilted to the side, as if in sudden consternation, and his grip on Peter's throat loosened just enough to let him breathe.

“Can we,” Peter tried to continue, still heaving for air, “Can we just...”

Before he could say another word, the axe vanished, just like before. Peter's rush of relief at the disappearance of the weapon faded as boar guy reached instead for the hem of his mask. “No- hang on-”

It was too late. The mask was pulled away from Peter's face, and he began to struggle once again, fighting to hide his features. He knew full well that the effort was futile. The guy had seen him, knew what he looked like, could track him down and find Aunt May and Ned and MJ-

But once again, the guy surprised him. With a quiet huff, the iron grip vanished, letting him drop to the ground. He pulled back, that boar skull still tilted to one side, studying him closely.

Battered and bewildered, Peter slumped against the wall, too exhausted to try to make an escape. Instead, he stood there, watching as the man before him reached for the strap of his own mask.

Wordlessly, he pulled the boar skull away, revealing an unnervingly human face beneath the red-stained bone.

Only- it wasn't *quite* human. His ears were pointed, half-folded, almost elf-like, and adorned with a single brilliant green gemstone. Two sharp tusks jutted from his lower lip, curving upwards, gleaming ivory white. And, most strikingly, behind a few loose strands of bright pink hair, his eyes shone a brutal blood red.

"Oh, god," He said, his voice deeper than Peter had expected. Quickly, the guy glanced over his shoulder at the ongoing fight. Trident woman, to Peter's amazement, was holding her own against the god of thunder, and boar guy turned back with a satisfied expression. Then, he reached out and pulled some kind of glass vial out of nowhere.

"Right, kid-" He held the vial out to him. "Drink this."

And then, under his breath, he continued with something that Peter was suspiciously certain had sounded like, "*Prime, you'd better not be an orphan.*"

"What?" Wriggling backward, Peter shoved the vial aside. "I'm not drinking *that*, you-"

The man rolled his eyes. "It's just a health pot, kid, nothing to worry about."

"Wh- *hey* !"

His protest was cut off abruptly as the guy seemed to run out of patience. Stowing the vial away, he pulled another from nowhere, one that glowed the same shade of pink, but shaped slightly differently. "Hold still," He growled, and then he smashed the bottle at their feet.

To Peter's shock, the glass exploded in a great cloud of wafting fumes. Coughing, he tried to wave the smoke away from his face, and then he caught sight of his arm. His eyes widened.

His skin was *glowing* , wreathed in particles that shone the same color as the contents of that vial. As he watched, he could *feel* the ache of his bruises receding, fading into a faint twinge of pain. In utter astonishment, he raised his hands to his face, staring at the swirls of light that surrounded them.

“Y’know, the effects would have been stronger if you’d just drunk it,” Boar guy drawled, with a note of frustration.

“The effects...” Peter trailed off, still gazing at the slowly fading particles. “What *was* that?”

“Is this your first time seeing a health potion?” Boar guy looked surprised. “I mean, I guess you’re in hardcore, but-” He broke off, gesturing towards the city around them. “If you can build stuff like *this* , you’ve gotta have *some* potions, right?”

Peter blinked at him, bewildered.

Boar guy frowned, and then lowered the skull mask back over his face. “Uh- okay.” Reaching out once again, he pulled yet another vial from nowhere. “This is exactly the same potion as I just used, only you’ve gotta drink it instead of splashing it.” Pressing the vial into Peter’s still-outstretched hand, he moved to turn away. “Make sure you drink it slowly, or the magic could overwhelm your system. But it’ll take care of the rest of the damage.”

The guy took two strides in the direction of the battle, and then paused. He glanced over his shoulder, and said, “Now get out of here, you hear me?”

“I-”

Thor’s shout of pain interrupted him. Startled, he glanced towards the battle, beyond the spot where boar guy still stood. His heart seemed to drop through his newly-repaired stomach.

Thor was on the ground, with blood trickling down the side of his face, and leaking from the wounds on his side. His hammer had fallen to the ground a few feet away.

He wasn't moving.

Above him, the alien woman had bared her teeth in triumph. She stood over him, her bloodied trident poised, prepared to strike the final blow. The wind whipped through her rain-soaked hair, making her look almost unearthly, like some mythological hero bold enough to fell a god.

Above, thunder roared, and great arcs of crackling electricity began to leap to life amidst the shadowy clouds.

The woman raised the trident, and Peter shouted with all his might, "Wait! *Please* !" He sprinted forwards, past boar guy, and cried, "Please don't kill him!"

Behind him, he heard a loud, dramatic sigh, and then- to his relief- he heard boar guy's voice.

"Niki!" He called, more casually than Peter would have liked. "That's enough."

The woman- Niki- looked over at him sharply. Her trident was barely inches away from Thor's throat.

"He's knocked out, and he's *probably* not an orphan." Boar guy continued, and Niki gave him an incredulous stare. Anxiously, Peter stared at her, until finally, the tension drained from her shoulders, and she stepped away.

"You big softie," She muttered, striding back towards them, vanishing her trident with a wave of her hand.

Boar guy rolled his eyes with a grin, and then looked around. Suddenly, his eyes widened, and he took off, heading towards the edge of the road. Confused, Peter hurried after him and realised suddenly where he was going.

Hanging on a silk thread, head down and wrapped in spider webs, the winged alien was still imprisoned. The swearing had stopped, now, but his breathing was shallow and much too fast. He was muttering something under his breath, eyes squeezed shut, trembling like a leaf.

“Phil?” Boar guy called, more gently than Peter had been expecting. “It’s alright, old man, I’m here. I’m gonna get you down, alright? Try not to panic.”

Phil whispered something as boar guy summoned a small knife, something wavering and scared. Peter couldn’t make it all out, but he caught a few words. Only- why was he asking about an *elytra* ? Wasn’t that something to do with beetles?

Evidently, boar guy understood him. With a glance at Phil’s wings, he said, “No. You got lucky, man. It’s fine, the webs didn’t touch it.”

Peter was sure that he had not mistaken the look of sheer relief on Phil’s face. A moment later, the knife flashed, *back and forth* , and the winged alien tumbled to the ground.

“ *Ow!* Could’ve been more careful, mate!”

“Well,” Boar guy replied, apparently unable to resist a teasing grin. “You could have been more careful not to get caught.” He reached out a hand, pulling Phil back to his feet, and the two shared a look that Peter didn’t understand.

A moment later, the pink-haired woman was sprinting towards them. “They have reinforcements!”

Sure enough, the rumble of approaching vehicles was echoing down the street. In the distance, Peter could just make out the broad figure of Captain America hurtling in their direction. Black Widow was right behind him, riding a sleek black motorcycle, and a few others flanked them, too far away for him to identify.

Relief flooded through him, and he almost cheered, before remembering exactly where he was. He wasn't entirely sure what would happen to him once the others stopped ignoring his presence.

"Right." Boar guy squared his shoulders, obviously thinking fast. "Phil, go grab Tubbo and Ranboo. Niki, could you start up a Wither for cover?" The knife disappeared from his hand, replaced instantly by the battleaxe. "I'll guard."

With brief nods, the two hurried away, and boar guy turned to Peter. "I'd get out of here, if I were you," He said, calmly. "Once it spawns in, it's not gonna be able to tell friend from foe. It's gonna attack anythin' that lives and breathes, got it?"

Hastily, Peter nodded. But before he made to scramble away, he hesitated.

"Can I, uh-" Sheepishly, he broke off. Boar guy stood there, looking at him, one eyebrow raised. "I, um. I just..." Vaguely, Peter gestured towards boar guy's hands. The guy didn't move, but gazed at him with growing confusion. "You, uh- you still have my mask..."

"Ah." With a hint of awkwardness, boar guy handed it over. "Here. Uh, sorry."

"Thanks!"

Without another word, Peter yanked the mask down over his head and turned on his heel. Boar guy stared after him as he dashed back towards the side road where he had left Mr. Stark.

Steve Rogers had never been one for a quiet life. He had seen many things, some good, some bad, and some so utterly horrifying as to never be repeated.

None, however, had ever been as literal a horror as the three-headed monstrosity that now gazed emptily down at him, scanning its surroundings with hollow, rotting eye sockets.

He had arrived just in time to see its twisted birth. The thing had erupted with the force of a small bomb, bringing down two more apartment blocks, and shuddered to life with an echoing howl that had nearly ruptured his eardrums. It had clawed its way from the soil, all fractured bone and shattered skull, dripping with a dark, oily substance that hissed and smoked as it ate away at the ground below it.

Slowly, almost paradoxically, it rose into the air, each head jerking left and right, jaws snapping. The thing looked like it was strung together by nothing more than ropes of withered sinew and decayed muscle, woven with some foul substance that Steve didn't care to identify. Reality itself seemed to tremble with revulsion as it hauled itself towards the skies, as if also in shock that such a thing could exist.

Wanda, thank the gods, had been the first to snap out of the dismay that had briefly overtaken them all. She sprinted forwards, her hands already alight with ripples of her scarlet aura. Flinging out her arms, she conjured a shield between it and them, just in time to block some kind of projectile.

Taking advantage of the temporary cover, Vision hurried to Agent Coulson. Steve knew that he was muttering hasty orders to retreat, to pull back their barricade, evacuate as many blocks in the surrounding area as they possibly could.

A cry of alarm reached his ears, and he turned to see Thor staggering towards them. Despite the blood that soaked his left side, and trickled down his face, he was managing to carry Stark, whose armor was crumpled and scorched, frozen, and dead. Behind them, the young spider-hero, Peter, and Barton were supporting Sam. His beautiful wings hung limply from his back, a twisted wreck of their former glory.

He hurried towards them, reaching out to support Stark. "What *is* that thing?" He asked Thor, hoping against hope that the god might know how to fight it.

But, to his disappointment, Thor merely shook his head. "I have never seen a creature such as this. The world travelers summoned it, using some wicked ritual."

“They called it a, uh- a Wither, I think,” Peter intervened, face grim. “He said that it’s gonna attack anything alive.”

Anything alive... Steve felt a chill shoot down his spine. “We have to contain it. If it gets out to the city-”

“*I’m trying*,” Wanda called, her face twisted in pain. “But I don’t think I can- hold on- much longer!”

Her shield had expanded into a great force field, trapping it in place. But the thing was thrashing violently, hurling huge, foetid skulls at the boundaries. The projectiles erupted as they hit the field, hurling waves of darkness across the rippling scarlet.

Every time they struck, Wanda flinched, clearly in terrible pain. To Steve’s shock, he realized that black particles were beginning to form around her hands, spiraling languidly into the air, eating away at her aura of power. But she refused to let go, to release it, despite her labored breathing and agonized eyes.

Hastily, Steve glanced around for the offworlders; surely they must know how to stop it if they had summoned the thing. But they were long gone by now- probably finding somewhere to hide out in the depths of the city.

This was bad news. If they had the ability to summon *more* of these horrors-

The evacuation sirens began to blare. Vision hurtled back to Wanda’s side, hands outstretched, summoning a force field of his own.

But they were too scattered, too disorganized, to fight it effectively. Rapidly, Steve took charge. “Thor, can you still fight?”

“I still have a bit left in me.”

“Good. Wanda, Vision, you two try to keep it within the perimeter. Thor, Barton, you’re with me. Let’s see if our attacks have any effect on it.”

“And me, sir?” Spider-Man asked eagerly. “What should I do?”

“You get Stark out of here,” Steve directed. “Then see if you can help with the evacuation, got it?”

The kid’s face fell, evidently disappointed with his instructions. At least he had enough sense to follow them without complaint.

He was a good kid, Steve thought, briefly. Intelligent, and responsible, and his heart was in the right place. More than could be said about most of them, if he was being honest. Once he grew up a little more, he’d make a fine addition to the team.

For that to happen, though, he would definitely still need to be alive. Which meant that they had to kill this monstrosity before it wrecked the city.

Wanda slowly released the tiny force field that surrounded it. Vision had already spread a larger one above it, ensuring that it couldn’t escape, although- looking at it- it was clear that it had no such intention.

The monster was focused on them, and them alone, and it was shuddering with deadly energy.

This was going to be a long battle, Steve thought with a grim sigh, and he raised his shield and charged.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In the distance, a blurred figure soared through the clouded skies. It looked twisted, unreal; dragging itself through the air, lurching this way and that. On occasion, it hurled a wave of- *something* - that flashed black and white and blew ragged holes into the sides of the buildings that surrounded it. Rubble tumbled from the air and shattered across the roads. The place looked as though it had been bombarded.

Josh watched the wavering, fuzzy camera feed on the small television screen, positioned high on the wall of the restaurant's dining hall. He stood next to the table that he had just been serving, a plate held forgotten in his hands. Had anyone been watching him, he would undoubtedly have been pulled aside with a quiet warning to cut the daydreams and get back to work. Fortunately, nobody was paying him any attention. The entire restaurant was perfectly silent, save for the professional voice of the newsreader who stood in the corner of the screen. Her calm voice, jarringly at odds with the chaos and destruction that had utterly transfixed the restaurant patrons.

“The evacuation sirens have been activated.” Her face was neutral, but her eyes were grim. “Everyone is requested to remain calm, and ordered to move to a safe location. Police are stationed around the streets to guide you to the nearest shelter. Please follow their instructions.”

Without warning, the double doors set into the back wall burst open, and Tina strode into the dining room of her restaurant, tugging the clear gloves from her hands. “Alright!” She called, and all eyes flicked to her. “You heard the woman.” Giving everyone a stern look, she folded her arms. “Get a move on!”

With a flurry of scraping chairs and shuffling steps, the patrons who still remained leaped up and headed for the door. Nobody bothered to pay, or do more than grab their jackets and make for the exit. Tina chivvied on a few stragglers and then swung around the counter to empty the register. Josh hesitated, caught between a desire to help, and the sudden, nauseating realization that- that this was happening at all.

The evacuation sirens were sounding. Some deadly danger was in the heart of the city, and the Avengers themselves might not be enough to stop it.

“Josh?” Tina glanced at him, stripping off her apron. “You should get out of here. Find somewhere safe.”

“But- what about y-you?”

Her face softened into a faint smile. “Don’t worry about me. But would you toss out the rubbish before you go? I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Of course, b-boss!” It would take two minutes to clear out the waste. Josh gathered it up as fast as he could and hurried to the little alleyway at the back of the restaurant.

He’d have to head straight back to camp, he thought, wrangling the bags into the great bins pushed against the wall. The others might not even know about the evacuation yet, and Pam could probably use some help. And Tommy, too, would be frightened by the chaos.

Or perhaps not, he reflected, slamming the lid closed. New to the streets or not, the kid was more resilient than he really gave him credit for.

Regardless, Josh turned on his heel, ready for the long run back to the camp, when a familiar voice froze him to the spot.

“Hey, pal! How’s it going?”

A shiver trickled down Josh’s spine. Slowly, he turned, knowing what he would find, and already dreading the outcome.

Leaning casually against the wall of the alleyway, Liam shot him a lazy grin. His shoulders were relaxed, head tilted, as though they were the best of friends. As though nothing had changed.

Josh could feel his heart begin to thrum, panic rising in his chest. “I-I’m not d-done selling the- uh, the p-product yet-” Frantically, he glanced around, the evacuation forgotten. At least Liam’s mercenary gorillas were absent, he noted with a flicker of relief. At least he wasn’t about to get beaten to a bloody pulp. But that didn’t mean that there was no threat. “P-please- you c-can’t be here! If my b-boss sees you- I c-can’t lose this job, p-please, just-”

“Hey, hey!” Liam raised his hands placatingly, his grin softening until it was almost gentle. “I’m not here t’ cause you any trouble!” He shifted easily, still relaxed- almost cheerful. “In fact, quite the opposite! I’ve brought ya good news!”

“Wha- *What* ?”

“I’ve got ya a way out! Clean, no strings attached!”

“L-Liam,” Josh stared at him, searching for his old determination. “Look, I- I don’t want any p-part in your-”

“In any of my schemes?” Liam cut him off, chuckling. “No, no, my friend. I’m here t’ be a part of *yours* !” His voice was sickeningly gleeful. “I should have known that you’d never really leave this life behind! Of course a sleazebag like you would be planning something, I could feel it! I just couldn’t figure out what ‘til now.”

“What are you t-talking about?”

Liam rolled his eyes, though his voice remained patient. “You don’t have t’ keep playing dumb. Kingpin announced it yesterday.” He spread his hands, face alight. “The prize for that brat you’ve been hanging around with.”

“I don’t- don’t know wh-what you’re t-talking about...”

With a widening, predatory grin, Liam pushed off the wall. Slowly, he began to approach Josh, his eyes gleaming with triumph. “Tall, lanky, blond, around sixteen, seventeen years old. Very bratty.” He said. “Blue eyes, scars on his hands. Last seen wearing a white shirt with red sleeves. Sound familiar?” His voice was twisted with sardonic pleasure. “Wonder who I thought of the moment I heard that description?”

“L-Liam, *please* -”

“No worries. I didn’t tell anyone about ya.” Liam waved him off with one hand. “We’ll do it together, just us, just like old times! All I want is half the money!”

“Liam-”

“Come on now, Josh.” As though a switch had been flipped, the friendly cheer fell away. A look of warning rose rapidly in its place, threatening very nasty consequences if Josh kept refusing to play along. “Don’t be *too* greedy here. I’m being quite generous already, just by being willing to work together. Even *after* you betrayed me. It wouldn’t’ve been hard to just kill you, and take the kid myself.”

“Liam!” Though the man’s words sent a chill through his heart, Josh drew himself up. “I’m not going to *sell* him!” He squared his shoulders, staring into Liam’s eyes, fighting to make him understand. “I’m trying to help him! He’s just a kid, they’ll kill him if they get hold of him!”

He knew that his pleas sounded desperate. All he could hope was that somewhere, deep down, his words might break through. There had been a time, after all, when they had had each other’s backs. Maybe, just maybe...

“Don’t tell me that you’re actually serious.” For the first time, the hungry smile disappeared from Liam’s face. “You’ve gone soft on me. Christ, Josh- you disappoint me.” Slowly, almost sadly, he shook his head. “And here I was, really thinking that you were smarter than you look.”

“I’m sorry, Liam. But I’m n-never going to give you Tommy.”

“Well,” Liam said, and the cruel grin returned, fast and sharp as a switchblade. “Good thing I’m not really giving you a choice then, isn’t it?”

Tommy hoisted another sack over his shoulder and turned to smile at the woman who had handed it to him. She was one of the older women in the group and had been having difficulty keeping up with the pace. Though she had given him a suspicious glare when he had first offered to give her a hand, she had relented with a few words from Pam and allowed him to carry her meager supplies.

His flicker of relief at the sight of the woman stretching her shoulders, free from the weight of her belongings, died at the sight ahead. Pam's brow was furrowed with worry as she gave her strange communicator a click, her call left unanswered once again.

Josh was still not picking up. He should have joined them twenty minutes ago but was still nowhere to be seen.

Could something have happened to him?

Surely not, Tommy reasoned, trying to reassure himself. Dream was hunting him, Tommy, and him alone. He probably didn't even know that Josh existed, let alone that Tommy had been traveling with him. He couldn't possibly pose a danger to his friend.

But Dream wasn't the only threat out on these streets.

Up ahead, Pam seemed to be reaching the same conclusion. Jaw set, she stuffed her communicator back into her pocket, and said, "You guys carry on without me." A few heads turned to look at her, caught between surprise and worry. She continued, regardless, "You know where to go. I'll just make a quick detour."

"Josh still not picking up?" Mark asked, concern clear in his eyes. "Maybe he got stuck in the foot traffic, or- something? With his phone on silent? He was at work, after all."

"Maybe." Pam didn't look convinced. "But I can go and check the restaurant, see if he's still there. It's not so far from here."

“I can carry your stuff if you’d like?” Mel asked. She looked anxious; too scared to join Pam, but nervous to leave her behind. Pam gave her a searching look and passed over her bag with a brief nod.

“Drag the bastard back,” Mark called, jokingly, trying to cut through the tension that surrounded them. “He owes us a good song, once all this is over.”

Pam’s laugh was short, and as she turned away, the group continued grimly on their way.

All except for Tommy.

With a hasty word to Mark, he handed over the sacks slung across his back. Shooting a grateful smile over his shoulder, he doubled back, hurrying after Pam. In seconds, he drew level with her, and fell into step at her side.

“I’m comin’ with,” He informed her.

She sighed. “Go with them, Tom. I’ll just grab Josh and we’ll be there before you know it.”

“No way.” Tommy could feel his chin rising, relentless and stubborn to the bitter end. “You heard the- the will of the people. I’ve gotta help you drag him back. What kind of president would I be if I let other people do my jobs for me?” He was only half joking. President or not, he wasn’t about to let his only friends be lost amidst the chaos. He was going with Pam whether she liked it or not, and evidently, she understood. With another dramatic sigh, she passed a hand over her face and then gestured for him to follow.

“Come on then, Mr. President,” She said, with a brief smile. “Although I don’t seem to remember holding an election for the role.”

“Yeah,” Tommy replied, nodding sagely as he hurried in her wake. “We’re not democratic, I just elected myself.” He heard Pam’s laugh, and, despite himself, he smiled too.

In the end, they didn’t have to walk for long. The restaurant where Josh worked was no more than a few streets away, and the roads were eerily empty. Most of the people had already managed to evacuate to the shelters, leaving their path clear of crowds.

Though they were miles from the scene of the battle, they still passed the occasional troops. Pam tugged Tommy out of sight each time a squadron drew near, hiding them both in the shadows of a side road. Tommy watched them with curiosity; big guys with bigger weapons and the letters S.H.I.E.L.D stamped on their uniforms. As soon as they disappeared out of sight, Pam and Tommy took off once again, tracing the unfamiliar route to the restaurant.

Two minutes later, they found it.

The place was small, Tommy thought as they approached, and had probably been rather cozy. Now, though, it looked like it had been ransacked with its windows broken, and furniture laying on the pavement outside.

He barely heard Pam’s gasp of horror. The pair broke into a run towards it, and Pam shoved the door wide, allowing watery daylight to spill out over the wreckage. Half-eaten food was strewn across the floor, scattered around upturned tables and broken chairs. Shards of glass littered the ground around the smashed windows.

Tommy stepped carefully inside, staring around. What could have happened? The place was far from the scene of the fight; who had left it in such a state? And why?

He was shaken from his thoughts by the sound of a quiet groan. Startled, he glanced around to find Pam kneeling in the rubble, reaching out towards a woman lying on the ground. With a brief swoop of sick shock in his stomach, he wondered if the woman was dead- but no, Pam was helping her back to her feet. She looked dazed and a little unsteady, holding Pam’s shoulder for balance, but her eyes cleared and hardened as she looked around.

“Are you alright?” Pam asked, gently. “What happened here?”

“I’m- yeah, I’m fine,” The woman brushed the dust and glass shards from her clothes as she spoke, pressing her fingers to a nasty bruise on her cheek. “Just the local mafia. Damned opportunists!” Her teeth were gritted, and she let go of Pam’s arm, shaking her head. “Trashed the place and took the money. And they’ve got one of my employees at gunpoint! God, now I have to deal with the police as well! As if one disaster wasn’t enough...”

“Your employee?” Pam had gone very pale. “You don’t mean- they didn’t take Josh?”

“I- yeah, they- there wasn’t anything I could do. I gave them all the money...”

“Who was it? Who took him?”

“The local guy. Name’s... Luke? No, wait. Liam, I think.”

Pam went, somehow, even paler. “Liam...”

“Liam?” Tommy’s eyes widened. “That’s the guy- I mean- he’s the one who wanted us to sell his drugs!”

“ *What ?*”

Tommy flinched as both women whipped around to face him, looking utterly thunderstruck. Too late, he realized that it may have been wiser to keep his mouth shut.

“Hold on- Josh promised me that he was clean!” The woman looked stern, gazing at him grimly. “I hired him because he told me that his old life was behind him!”

“He was! He *is* !” Tommy’s words seemed to tumble over each other in his hurry to explain the situation. “It’s my fault we were in this mess- you’ve gotta blame me, not him-” He hoped desperately that they would understand; he had been the one to provoke Liam, not

Josh. “I- I ran my big mouth again, and it got us both in trouble- he only took it to protect *me*”

Wilbur had told him, had *warned* him that his hot temper would land him in trouble, and he had been right every time. But usually, nobody else had been forced to take the fall for his mistakes. And now, Wil- now *Josh* was dealing with the consequences.

He *needed* this job, and, more importantly, he loved it. If Tommy was the reason he ended up fired...

“If it *is* Liam, then I think I know where he’s taken Josh,” Pam said, and Tommy’s attention snapped back to her. They had a much more important problem to deal with right now. “The problem is that it’s on the other side of town.”

“Ok- how are we gonna get there?”

“I’ll drive.” The woman said, suddenly. They both looked at her, and Tommy knew that they both wore identical expressions of surprise. She simply shrugged it off, and said, “He’s a good employee. Now come on, before I change my mind.”

As they hurried out of the ruined restaurant, Tommy took a final glance over his shoulder at the wreckage. His heart seemed to sink just a little lower in his chest at the sight. Just one more devastation caused by his mistakes. One more disaster wrote into a past that overflowed with them. All abandoned to their fates, left behind as he ran headlong into something new.

Was this all he was good for, in the end? Chasing empty promises and false hopes, tugged this way and that like a leaf on the wind, leaving nothing but blown-up countries and burned-down houses in his wake? Worming his way into people’s hearts, before ruining their lives and escaping the consequences?

Had they been right? The cruel words that a furious Wilbur had hurled at him like knives, Tubbo’s deadened orders to *leave his country*, and Dream’s calculated whispers and jibes, all of them eating away at the foundations of his soul like acid on sturdy rock. *Had they been right, after all?*

A warm hand landed on his shoulder, and he turned to see Pam. Her face was set, her eyes determined, and a trace of reassurance lingered in her faint smile.

“Don’t worry, Toms,” She told him. “We’ll get Josh back.”

“Drive, you utter knobhead *prick!* Who the *hell* decided to give you a license? *Get a move on*, fuckers! My granny can *skip* faster than you decrepit bastards and she’s one hundred and *four!*”

As it turned out, the woman from the restaurant was Josh’s boss. Her name was Tina, and Tommy decided- the moment she began hurling a series of very creative insults at the drivers who surrounded them- that he liked her. She was fun.

Unfortunately, what was decidedly *not* fun was being in a car.

He had eyed the strange redstone contraptions with great suspicion the moment he had first seen them, and- as it turned out- his first mistrustful impressions had been correct. Being *inside* one of the things, traveling at what must have been three times the speed of a minecart and then suddenly slowing down to a crawl, weaving dizzily around corners and bouncing up and down hills, was even worse. Tommy clung on for dear life, trying desperately not to get flung around, clutching the seat before him in a white-knuckled grip. His stomach was swirling uncomfortably, the way it did whenever he got hit by a nausea potion or ate a piece of too-raw meat.

“So,” He gritted out, trying to distract himself from the motion sickness, “You know Liam?”

Pam glanced at him sharply and seemed to take in his pale face. Her gaze softened. “Yeah,” She admitted, quietly. “He wasn’t always such a dick. The three of us- me, Josh, and him- we used to be thick as thieves.” There was irony mingled with the fondness in her chuckle. “Hell, we *were* thieves, back then. Did whatever we had to do to get by. You get it, right?”

Whatever we had to do. Unwillingly, the memories clamored forward in his mind, flashing images and echoing snippets of voices: him, Tubbo, and big Q in the back streets of SMPLive, sneaking into auto farms and storage systems to snatch whatever food they could get their hands on; running, sprinting away from tall players with cruel faces who were chasing him, hunting him down in their eagerness to take the gifts that he alone was

permitted to possess; himself, lunging out of a dark corner and holding a knife to Wilbur's stomach, as high up as he could reach, shouting at this lanky, brown-haired stranger to hand over his items.

And then later, making potions on stolen brewing stands with Wilbur standing proudly by his side; watching helplessly from a rooftop as an explosion of colorful sparks erupted from the stage of the festival; staring, panicking, as his fire spread uncontrollably to the wooden roof of a small mushroom home-

He had lied, and when that hadn't worked, he had stolen. He had tricked and cheated and fought and schemed and now, now he was paying the price for it all. Whatever he had to do, he had done. Look where it had left him. Look where it had left Josh.

Another swerve around a corner broke him from his thoughts. He nodded quickly, hoping against hope that Pam hadn't noticed his sudden spiral into his memories. What kind of ally would he make if he couldn't learn to control his own mind?

His sudden surge of panic was tempered slightly by his lingering curiosity. What path had broken Liam so irrevocably apart from his erstwhile friends? What had happened to the rough little group, fighting day after day for survival?

"So-" He began again but hesitated. The last thing that he wanted was to open up old wounds, and yet- suddenly, irrationally, he needed to know the full story. It had become important, somehow. Cautiously, he opened his mouth, and asked, "What happened?"

"Kingpin happened," Pam said. Short and simple. "He came along, took us off the streets. And got us doing his... errands." Her tone grew bitter. Though Tommy couldn't see her face, he could tell that her eyes were dark. "Me and Josh, we hated it. We did what we did because we had no choice, but we were always planning our escape. Liam, on the other hand-" She paused and sighed. "He worshipped Kingpin. Seemed to believe that the sun shone from his arse."

Tommy winced. Pam shook her head. "We made it work, for a while. And then Josh got himself caught selling drugs. By Daredevil, you know who he is, yeah? Well, Daredevil beat him up pretty badly, got him to spill everything he knew about Kingpin and his operations. It wasn't pretty."

Shocked, Tommy turned to stare at her. "But- I thought Daredevil- Josh said that he's a good guy?" His surprise was tinged with doubt, and no small amount of worry; he had hoped that

they might have had another person on their side, despite Josh's certainty that he could handle the situation alone. And besides- though he would never admit it aloud- he had rather liked the sound of the vigilante. The idea of there being some kind of hero, springing in the shadows to right wrongs and then disappearing back into the night. It had sounded nice if a bit naive and childish. The realization that Daredevil may not be the savior of Josh's description was a bitter blow.

Fortunately, Pam seemed to understand. "He is, though. A good guy, I mean. Afterward, he introduced Josh to a brilliant lawyer- the only man willing to take on his case. And for free, as well. Got Josh out of jail and into rehab. He turned his life around."

"Oh." It took Tommy a moment to turn the idea over in his mind. Prime, why did these kinds of situations always have to be complicated? Josh had been telling the truth about Daredevil's involvement with his life, he supposed, but- Tommy couldn't stand the thought of his friend being hurt so badly. He didn't want to dwell on it. "What about Liam? He wasn't happy about you leaving, I reckon."

"No." Pam's brow furrowed, and she shook her head. "He wasn't. He thought that we'd betrayed him."

After that, the pair fell into silence, broken only by Tina's occasional furious swearing. There was nothing more to be said.

The car continued to swerve and screech wildly, tearing down the roads, until finally, Pam called, "Alright! It's here!"

With a lurch that threw them all forwards, the car jerked to a halt, groaning as the redstone mechanisms within it struggled to kill its momentum. Tommy flung the door open the moment they fell still, scrambling out of the awful contraption, thankful to be back on safe, solid ground. Pam was quick to follow.

Tina kept her door firmly closed. "Well," She said, lowering her window. "This was my part done. I'm sorry that I can't do more to help you, but..." Even as she trailed off, Tommy could see the regret in her face. "I have a family of my own to take care of."

"You've done more than enough," Pam reassured her. "Thank you."

“I- I hope that everything turns out well for you, in the end.” Tina’s voice was gentle, subdued, more so than Tommy had ever heard from her. Her smile was small, and somehow both encouraging and slightly sad, and that was the last thing that he saw before she pulled away from the side of the road.

The two walked the rest of the way in silence. It wasn’t far. Pam kept her hand on Tommy’s shoulder, ensuring that they moved slowly, and carefully, making sure that they wouldn’t get spotted. Tommy kept glancing around, half-certain that, at any moment, one of Liam’s goons would come bursting out from around a corner, teeth bared in a snarl.

Fortunately, they reached the building without incident. Pam nudged Tommy in the ribs as they approached, and pointed at the ramshackle old warehouse before them.

“This is it.”

Tommy couldn’t help wrinkling his nose as he stared at it. The place looked ugly, even by the low standards of this world; huge and lumbering, but sagging, lopsided, eaten away with rust. It looked set to cave in at any moment. Even the plants forcing their way up through the cracks in the faded tarmac outside looked stringy and wan. “What *is* this place?”

“It’s where we stayed when we worked for *him* .” Pam explained, glaring bitterly at the rotting warehouse. “It’s sturdier than it looks. Useful place to stash whatever Kingpin was dealing at the time. If Liam really does have Josh, this is where they’ll be.”

“And I thought I lived in a shack...” Tommy was only half-joking as he stared at the building. “Right. What’s the plan? We barge in, find Josh, demand to speak to the manager?”

The comment fell flat as Pam seemed to hesitate. “I- I don’t know...” Suddenly, she sounded unsure. “I didn’t really think that far ahead.”

“Uh- okay. Is there going to be anyone else inside?”

“I don’t know.”

“Any security?”

“I don’t know!” She groaned in frustration. “I haven’t been there in years, anything could have changed- oh, god, this was stupid- I don’t have any proof that Liam even brought him here-”

She was cut off by the rumble of engines. The pair glanced at each other, wide-eyed, and then scrambled for cover behind the wall of the warehouse. Cautiously, Tommy peered around the corner, careful to keep to the slanting shadows.

Two more cars, long and black and polished to a shine, drew up outside the main doors. They looked, somehow, far more menacing than Tina’s had; like comparing a goldfish to a shark.

The doors flew open in unison, and men dressed in smart suits stepped out. One of them hastened to open the rear door of the second car and snapped to attention as another man appeared, folding himself out from his seat with surprising grace.

A chill seemed to spread through the air as he rose, brushing imaginary specks of dust from his sleeves with idle flicks of his hands. He was enormous, easily as tall as he was broad, and wore a sleek, expensive-looking white suit, fitted to him perfectly. Something about him reminded Tommy strangely of Schlatt- though the two looked nothing alike, they carried the same air of well-earned power about them.

Judging by the subtle glances of reverence that the surrounding men gave him, this man was undoubtedly the leader. Tommy wondered suddenly if this was the very man that Pam and Josh had described; the Kingpin himself. But he had no time to dwell on it, because another man was climbing smoothly out of the car behind him, a man who wore white trousers and a violently green hoodie, and whose face was covered by a blank, smiling mask.

Tommy’s heart had already been slamming itself against his ribs, like a trapped bird fighting for freedom.

At the sight of Dream, it seemed to stop entirely.

And all he could hear was silence.

Silence, and the harsh sawing sound of his own ragged, panicked breaths.

Silence, and the thunder of explosives in a little pit filled with makeshift tools.

Silence and a burst of friendly laughter as his meager scraps of food were burned.

Silence, and-

The next thing he knew, he was on the ground, his arms clenched around his aching chest, his back against the wall. His vision was blurred and spotty. It took him a moment to realize that the hands gently holding the sides of his face belonged to Pam.

It was another few seconds before he could actually hear the words that she was saying.

She was speaking to him, quietly, reassuringly- *the way Wilbur would describe his promises for L'Manberg, It will be magnificent, Toms-* reminding him to breathe when he took too long to exhale- *Dream, dragging him from the water in Logstedshire as the dawn light turned the sand red, Come on Tommy, keep breathing-* telling him that he was alright- *Techno scooping him up from the floor of his basement, You're alright now, you're okay, Theseus-*

He was alright. *S'ok, Tech-*

He was breathing. *Get off me, Dream-*

He had a big brother to rescue. *We can do this, Wil.*

"I'm- I'm okay... I think." He closed his eyes, tried to steady his trembling hands, and took a few deep breaths.

“You sure?” Pam asked, carefully. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost, Tom. Was it the guy in the weird mask?”

“Uh- yeah. He’s... His name is Dream. He wants me dead, I think.”

“ *What?* ”

Tommy hesitated. How much could he risk sharing with Pam? How much time did they have? Should he tell her that he was not, in fact, from this world? No, that would be too much, surely- but what if Dream started using potions, or even something so simple as his inventory- anything that they somehow couldn’t use in this world? What if Pam ended up hurt, or worse, because of something that she couldn’t explain and had not been prepared for?

In the end, he opted for the shortest version of his story that he could manage.

“I’m not from here,” He blurted out. “Like, from this world. And- and neither is Dream. But I can’t go home, and he’s wanted me dead for a long time, and he’s fucking *evil* , and he must have found out that I was with Josh-” He broke off. “It’s a long story, and I swear I’m not crazy, and I’m not lying- but we have to get closer, we need to know what they’re saying-”

Pam was staring at him with a mixture of shock, confusion, and horror. “Tom-”

“ *Please.* ”

Another moment passed in silence. Slowly, Pam seemed to compose herself. Tommy could almost *see* the war being waged behind her eyes; mistrust, suspicion, and doubt mingled with the friendship and camaraderie. He waited, frozen with tension, for her decision.

Finally, she set her jaw and nodded. “Come on.”

With a wave of relief, Tommy followed her as they sprinted towards the back of the warehouse. Pam led him straight to a window frame set into the wall, the glass long gone, save for a few shattered remnants still clinging stubbornly to the wood. Tommy pressed himself close to the wall to listen.

“...weren’t expecting you so soon, sir!” Liam’s voice rang out. He sounded slightly nervous and uncharacteristically polite. “I’m afraid that I don’t actually, ah... have the boy himself yet-”

“You said that you had a clue as to where he is?” This voice was deep and rasping. Tommy didn’t recognize it.

“Yes, sir! The kid that you’re looking for was last seen with this man!” Liam sounded nauseatingly like a loyal dog, wagging its tail at its master.

The curiosity was overwhelming. Slowly, cautiously, Tommy peered around the edge of the window, ignoring Pam’s sharp gesture for him to stay down.

He spotted Dream first, standing in the shadows beside the man who must be Kingpin. Both had their backs to him and were staring down at Liam, whose shoulders were hunched deferentially. One of his hands rested on the back of a chair, and in that chair-

Tommy thought that he might be sick. Josh was pinned to the chair, tied up, and gagged. His face was swollen, purple with bruises and bleeding from the cuts caused by Liam’s rings. He looked barely recognizable.

Dream took a step forward. When he spoke, to Tommy’s shock, he sounded just as outraged as Tommy felt.

“What the hell is the meaning of this?” He asked, loudly. “I asked you to help me find my *friend*, not beat people up!” Pushing Liam out of the way with one hand, he knelt beside Josh, and carefully untied the gag. Gently, he reached out to check the injuries that covered his face. “Punz, hand me a health pot.”

“It’ll cost you double,” The mercenary warned him. “Potions don’t exactly grow on trees here.”

“Alright, *fine*,” Dream replied, with a hint of irritation. “Just hand it over.” He drained a few drops of the potion onto his sleeve and used it to dab delicately at Josh’s cuts. “There, there. That should heal it all up. Are you alright? I’m so sorry about all this...”

As Tommy watched, utterly astonished at the sight of Dream’s sudden, unexpected *kindness*, the wounds on Josh’s cheeks began to mend. The bruises grew fainter, and the swelling began to go down. Behind him, he heard Pam’s quiet gasp and knew that she, too, had seen the potion’s effects.

“I’m- I’m f-fine...” Josh said, his voice still raw from the gag.

“I’m glad,” Dream said. “And I really am sorry.” He paused, and Tommy could almost *see* the subtle change in his stance, like an actor shifting flawlessly into a new role. “But please,” He continued, his voice high and soft. “I *need* to know. Is Tommy alright? Is he safe?”

If Tommy had not known Dream for years, had not seen him shout a declaration of war, cackle with laughter as his sword sliced through flesh and bone and the material of a navy blue uniform, shriek with delight as his arrow punched through a child’s heart, securing his victory over a stillborn nation... If he did not know who Dream *was*, he would have been entirely fooled. The care and concern almost *resonated* through the man’s voice- how could he be anything more than a frightened friend, searching desperately for a lost teenager?

Josh remained perfectly silent, staring at Dream’s mask. Unperturbed, Dream carried on, “Look, I don’t know if he told you- he- he’s in trouble. I’ve gotta help him, and I don’t know where- there are people out there who want him *dead*, alright? You have to tell me where he is!”

A dull, painful feeling was beginning to spread slowly through Tommy’s heart, and he cursed faintly under his breath. The *bastard*, he thought, furiously, that lying son of a *bitch*! How the hell did such an awful person manage to sound so *sincere*? Why couldn’t he just act like what he really was: a thief, a tormentor, and- even worse- a person who *enjoyed* it?

The ache in his chest was growing, pressing down on his lungs, making it difficult to breathe. He gritted his teeth.

Josh was a nice guy- a *kind* guy- and Tommy trusted him. Surely, he remembered what Tommy had told him about Dream. Only-

Would he realize that this was him? Would he be able to see through Dream's charade? All of Josh's kindness and honesty would ultimately betray them both. Would he continue to believe Tommy, in the face of such a convincing act? Or would he nod, agree with Dream, and begin to wonder if perhaps Tommy's true enemies did not hunt him in the real world, but in the shadowy depths of his mind?

Prime... Josh was going to lead Dream straight back to camp, and Tommy was utterly powerless to stop him. He wondered, briefly, if Dream would see the walls that he had built. Would he recognize what he had been trying to remake, here in the middle of this new world? Would he laugh? Or would he redouble his efforts to find Tommy, furious at the sight of the blatant show of stubbornness?

Either way, it meant only one thing for Tommy.

He couldn't go back.

His young, scrappy little nation was lost.

The friends that he had made, the tiny home that they had scratched out, all of it was lost, just like that. Gone as soon as it had been built. Crushed beneath Dream's thumb.

He had to get out of here, now. Before Josh fell for Dream's lies, Pam alongside him. He would only put them in greater danger by sticking with them, and besides, what if Pam- certain that she was acting with the best intentions- tried to stop him? No, he needed to run, *now*.

A tremor ran through his hands, and he took a breath; ready to choke out a hasty goodbye, an apology, and begin sprinting for the road. But in the heartbeat before he could get the words out Josh spoke, and Tommy froze.

"Fuck you!"

Tommy's eyes widened.

Josh was scowling, eyes narrowed with anger as he stared Dream down. “I know exactly who wants him d-dead, *Dream* . You’re the one who brought him h-here, after all.”

“Yeah, but- it was for his own safety-” Dream’s voice grew even more beguiling as he fought to continue the lie. But Josh merely looked angrier.

“What, d-do you think I’m an idiot? He’s b-been running from you for *days* , you *bastard* .”

And Josh drew back his head and spat on Dream’s mask.

Astonished, *amazed*, Tommy stared at the sight through the shattered window. Somewhere deep within his chest, the horrible numbing ache was fading, driven back by something new, something bright and glowing and warm. The pressure on his lungs receded, and the fresh air on his tongue as he took a breath tasted sweet.

Josh believed him. Josh trusted him.

Maybe, just maybe, there was still hope.

Through the window, Dream’s shoulders were set. He looked coiled and furious, like a cat about to pounce. Clearly, his patience had run short. Tilting his head, he gazed down at the man tied to the chair before him, and the quiet, pleading desperation disappeared from his voice like smoke. “Hmm. Fair enough, I guess.” He said, and there, *there* was the Dream that Tommy recognised. “I was hoping that we could do this the easy way, but...” He trailed off, delicately. “Since you want to be all stubborn about it, I guess I don’t really have a choice.”

Raising his wrist, he activated his communicator, tapping out his message with quick, practiced fingers. Tommy could tell that, behind the mask, a cruel smile was curling across his face.

And then, for the first time in days, Tommy’s own wrist vibrated slightly as his comm signaled a new notification.

His heart sank as he read the words.

< Dream > I'm sure we've been over this, Tommy. Attachment will only get you hurt. But you never learn, do you?

< Dream > You must know who I've got. Do you want him to walk out of here alive?

The final message was simple: a set of bright yellow coordinates. Barely a few blocks away from where Tommy was stood. The trap was laid, the bait in place- and what choice did he have, even now, than to walk right into it?

Gritting his teeth, he held his arm out to Pam, allowing her to read the message. Her eyes widened in dismay as she scanned the words.

"The other man," He asked her, his tone low and hurried. "That's him, Kingpin, right?"

She nodded, eyes still fixed on the screen.

"But then- what's *he* doing here? Is he here for Josh?"

"I- I don't *know*, Tom." Her voice was shaking. "We shouldn't have come here- *you* definitely shouldn't be here, god- why didn't I call the police, or-"

With a slight shock, Tommy realized that she was *trembling*. Pam, the brightest, most confident person that he had met in this world, was just as uncertain and frightened as he was.

And of course she was, he thought and could have kicked himself for not realizing it sooner. That hulking brute of a man was *Kingpin* - the man who, according to Josh, had control over more or less everything that went on in this city. The man who had sent helpless, struggling people to do his dirty work because they had nowhere else to turn.

The man who had taken in three starving teenagers and stuffed them into this decaying warehouse, sending them out delivering his destructive *products* , throwing them into the path of vigilantes who had no choice but to beat them bloody before they could be of any help.

Kingpin was to Pam exactly what Dream was to Tommy; an abuser, and a tormentor. And here, he held the same power that Dream had back on the server.

No wonder Pam was so scared. No wonder it was difficult for her to even say his name.

The revelation shocked Tommy back to his senses. He glanced through the broken window once more, seeking out Josh's face. Though the swelling had gone down, it was not completely healed, and a few droplets of blood still leaked from a particularly nasty cut beneath his eye.

How in the name of Prime was Tommy going to save him?

"The police wouldn't've helped us anyway, would they?" He murmured, thinking hard. "Not if Kingpin is involved."

He shifted out of sight of the window and straightened up to his full height, brushing the dust from his shirt. In the back of his mind, a faint run of familiar notes began to play; the melody of the Able Sisters lending him unwavering resolve.

Whatever happened, he could not lose another friend. Another brother.

A plan was beginning to take shape in his mind, hasty and desperate. Right here, right now, they were outnumbered and outgunned in every way. But they had two things on their side. First - the element of surprise; none of the goons in the warehouse would be expecting him so soon, and none of them would anticipate him to have an ally. And secondly- he wasn't just some dumb teenager, in over his head. He was Tommy Innit, the eternal thorn in Dream's side, the unquenchable fire of resistance. Wilbur may have been the president of L'Manberg, but Tommy, *Tommy* was its heart and soul.

In the end, he was his mother's son. Being the creation of Death herself, accidental or not, was not a common experience. It had its perks though. Wilbur's arrival in SMPLive, of course, had been one. The other had remained his precious secret, closely guarded throughout the years. Tubbo knew, of course, and he was sure that Wilbur and Phil had suspected, but-

Either way, he thought, stretching his shoulders and feeling the strain of a different, concealed set of bones, it was a gift that remained wholly unknown to Dream. And one that appeared unheard of here, in this world of cities and currency and worn-out people. This was not a trick that Kingpin would be expecting. It was a trick that might just allow them to get away in one piece.

Tommy felt an odd flutter of nerves in his stomach as the pieces came together in his mind. The knowledge that he had to keep his true nature a secret was ingrained deeply within him, a lesson taught again and again as he and Tubbo had run from the cold-blooded hunters of their old server. And he had kept it a secret throughout his life; in L'Manberg, in Pogtopia, during each battle and war, even as he had languished in exile.

Reaching this world had changed more than he would have believed. This was one of his last cards to play.

Wilbur would undoubtedly have told him that he was being reckless. Ultimately, revealing his truth would only leave him in greater danger than staying hidden.

But Wilbur is dead.

He's fucking dead. Gone. Lost in the rubble of his own godsdamned explosives, pierced with his own father's sword.

He's already killed one of my brothers.

And I don't care, I don't care what he thinks, I don't care .

I don't care if I've known Josh for less than a week.

I will not lose another brother.

No matter the cost.

Gripped with a surge of determination, he turned to Pam, his jaw set. "Okay, here's the plan. I go in there, make a scene and keep their eyes on me. You sneak in this way, grab Josh, and you both get yourselves to safety. They won't be expecting you, you can just--"

"What? *No* , Tom, I can't let you-" Pam's eyes widened, and she reached out to seize his wrist, trying to hold him in place. But Tommy was already moving.

“Don’t worry about me.” Even as he spoke, he could feel the limbs stir to life behind him, still small, still half-dissociated from true reality and concealed beneath the fabric of his shirt, but growing stronger by the second. “I’ll be fine. This isn’t my first encounter with Dream, and besides- I have my own way out. Trust me.” Even as he spoke, the winds rose around him, welcoming his return, ruffling his hair. How long had it been, he wondered?

Pam stared at him, her eyes dark. Slowly, she shook her head. “You’re not human,” She said. “Are you?”

Tommy hesitated, the familiar lie already resting on his tongue. He quelled it, silently, and replied, “No. Definitely not.” The brief urge to fling his arms wide and begin cackling something about aliens crossed his mind, and was hastily dismissed. Now was not the time.

“And, whatever you are- you’ll be able to escape from Kingpin?”

“Once you two are out? Nothing and nobody will be able to catch me, I swear.”

“And you’re-” Pam hesitated, clearly torn painfully in two. “You’re absolutely sure? Josh- I don’t think he’d be able to live with himself if you got hurt ‘cause of him...”

“Trust me.” Tommy held her gaze unwaveringly. “I am Tommy Innit, after all. I can escape some stupid green Teletubby, no problem!”

Pam hesitated, although Tommy couldn’t quite tell if it was due to her lingering reluctance to allow him into danger, or confusion over the Teletubby remark. Either way, she gave him one last calculating look, and then a single nod of assent.

After all, what choice did they have? Neither of them was prepared to simply leave Josh behind.

“Just- be careful, alright?” She asked.

He opened his inventory with one hand, searching through it for his chestplate. “Always am.”

The rising winds died as he strapped on the armor. He felt almost sad to see them go, although he knew that, soon enough, they would return. For now, though, his gifts would have to remain hidden. Wait for the right moment.

“Somehow,” Pam muttered, “That doesn’t make me feel any better about this.”

Tommy grinned as he retrieved his knockback stick. He turned back towards Pam for the briefest moment, and the two shared a nod of understanding.

Then, light as a shadow, he slipped away towards the entrance to the warehouse.

It took him a minute to reach the cracked tarmac. He had been forced to slip around the back of a nearby building in an effort to pretend that he had not been hidden barely blocks away from Dream’s coordinates. Once he reached the road, though, he stood straight, and seconds later, he was approaching the doors.

Two men in pressed suits were on guard outside and gave him wary glances as he drew near. Their arms hung loosely by their sides, but Tommy could make out the shapes of some strange weapons concealed within those expensive jackets.

“What’s your business here?” One of them asked, sharply. “Get lost, kid, alright?”

“Got an invitation, big man.” Tommy tried to put on a casual drawl as he flashed his communicator, as if this was all just a game. He wasn’t certain if it had worked.

“An invitation?”

“From Dream, man. You’ve heard of him, right?” He didn’t know why he was needling the guards. Perhaps it was just the nerves writhing in his belly, seeking some way out.

The pair looked at each other and then back down at him, studying him closely.

“No way,” One of them muttered. “They didn’t say he’d be so…”

“Shut it.” His companion scowled and waved a hand towards the door. “Let him through.”

“Why *thank* you,” Tommy replied, and then he was stepping inside.

The moment he was through the doors, every eye in the room snapped towards him. He registered surprise, even shock, mingled with the cruel smiles that surrounded him, and couldn’t help a flicker of amusement.

And then his gaze fell on Dream, and he felt as though a bucket of ice water had just crashed through his chest.

The former admin took a step forward, head tilting, but before he could say a word, a scream interrupted him.

“ *Tommy !*” Behind Dream, Josh looked devastated, his already damaged face twisting with horror.

Tommy felt a stab of guilt and hastily shoved it down. He’d explain, he’d explain everything once this was over, he’d apologize for dragging Josh into this, for scaring him-

But Josh was still staring at him, his voice tempered by dismay. “Run!” He shouted, straining forwards in his seat. “Get out of here, *quick* -”

His panicked words were cut short as Punz swung his fist.

The punch caught him across the jaw with enough force to knock him backward. The chair tipped back, and, with a *screech* , toppled to the ground, bringing Josh down with it. He sprawled out on the concrete with a cry of pain and fell silent.

Tommy fought to keep his face calm, ignoring the sight of Josh on the ground. He refused to give Dream the satisfaction of a reaction.

“Tommy.” The beady black eyes of Dream’s mask followed him as he moved. “I’m glad you came.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Tommy saw a shadow flicker around the broken window. His stomach dropped; Pam couldn’t sneak in yet, not while Punz was on the alert, he was too close-

“Shut up, Dream,” He replied, trying to catch the mercenary’s attention. “I’m here. Now *let Josh go* .”

Behind the mask, he heard a soft sigh, followed by a much louder laugh. “Oh, Tommy.” Dream was shaking his head, looking grotesquely *fond* , as though he was talking to a troublesome pet. “Tommy, Tommy. Never did learn your lesson, did you?” The laughter faded as he stepped closer. “First the discs, and then Tubbo. You just keep on getting *attached* to things! You *keep on* handing me your weaknesses!” He gestured extravagantly towards where Josh lay. “Why would I let him go when he’s already right where I need him?”

“Because if you do,” Tommy replied, squaring his shoulders, “I’ll come quietly.”

So far, Kingpin had not said a word. He was watching Dream with a mixture of interest and mild distaste, studying him closely. For now, he seemed content to analyze the situation as it unfolded. This was not, after all, his fight. Yet.

Dream laughed again. “Gods, *Tommy* ! You’ll come quietly no matter what!” With a flicker of motion, he drew his pickaxe from his inventory, spinning it casually in one hand. “Here. Let me *prove* it to you.”

And in a matter of seconds, there was a hole in the ground before them. One block wide. One block long.

Two blocks deep.

“Put your armor in the hole, Tommy.”

And everything else fell away.

He couldn't see Josh, Kingpin, or even Dream. He couldn't hear the echo of wheezing laughter.

There was only the hot sand beneath his bare feet, and the rush of waves breaking over the shoreline. There was only the summer heat beating down on the back of his neck, and the ache of his empty stomach. *Put your armor in the hole, Tommy* .

And he cowered, shuddered, and watched as his hard-earned tools were blown to splinters in that tiny little hole.

He was gone.

He was spiraling.

And there was nothing, nothing but-

Nothing but Josh, reaching out with something in his hands.

Passing him something.

Giving it back.

Friend's fleece, dusted clean of the grit and leaves.

Josh had pressed it gently into his hands, there in the dark of the dirty side road, handing it back without a second thought. Josh, who had so little, who was kind and generous and caring-

Passing him the sandwich, the carton of juice, the precious leftovers from the restaurant. Dropping his own beanie onto Tommy's head, and only taking it back when he really needed to. Singing Tommy's song, rebuilding one of the best moments of his life beside him, listening to him talk about Wilbur as the campfire burned low. Screaming at him to run, to save himself, even as he fought helplessly against the rope pinning him to the chair.

Faintly, somewhere in the distance, there was a voice, his own voice, screaming in his mind. Raging and swearing and shouting at him to *snap out of it* , *come back to me* , *damnit* -

Josh, who had taken in a shattered teenager and done his best, in the time that they had, to help him mend.

Come on, Tommy -

Tommy was not in exile. He was not a prisoner of Dream's twisted manipulation. Not anymore. Not while he had a brother to protect.

It's alright.

He was Tommy Innit, the son of Death, foster child of her Angel of Death. He was Wilbur's brother. What did this masked man have that Tommy could not fight to save?

And so he opened his mouth, and he stared straight into those beady eyes, and he said, "No."

The beach faded. Logstedshire disappeared. He was standing tall, high above the ground, his dirt pillar stretching away below him, gazing out towards the ocean. He was waiting beside Wilbur, his chin raised stubbornly, grinning with defiance. *We would rather die than give in to you and join your SMP* .

He was defiant. He was bold. He was not going to give in to Dream.

He was standing on the concrete floor of a rotting warehouse, and every eye was upon him. In the distance, he spotted the flicker of shadows as Pam made her move, ready to slip in through the window.

They were so close. It would take seconds for her to cut the ropes, and then they would both be gone, they would be free, and Tommy would give Dream a taste of his true power. The admin would find out exactly what happens when a candle flame begins to grow, fed with the fuel of fury. He would face the vengeance of the wildfire.

“No?”

Dream’s voice was curious, almost as if he wasn’t quite sure that he had heard correctly.

“No, Dream. You don’t have power over me.”

“Hmm.” Without warning, Dream spun around. Tommy almost shouted a warning, his heart slamming against his ribs, but caught himself just in time. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the shadow disappearing, tumbling away from the window frame, and his stomach dropped; Pam was safe, at least, but she hadn’t been fast enough.

Kingpin still hadn’t moved, though his goons were beginning to gather around him. His expression had turned thoughtful as he regarded the scene, as though he was watching actors performing in a play. There was something very calculating in his gaze.

With a swift movement, Dream leaned down and seized Josh by the collar of his sweater. He yanked him upright once more, setting the chair back in its feet.

Tommy watched him warily, but held still, nervous to provoke him while he stood that close to Josh.

Carefully, Dream bent closer. His voice grew softer, just the way it had when he had first spoken to Josh; once again playing the role of the worried friend. “It’s such a shame,” He said, “That you didn’t just tell me where Tommy was when I asked you nicely.” Gently, he squeezed Josh’s shoulder. “This could’ve ended so differently if you had.”

And in the space of a heartbeat, his sword plunged into Josh's chest.

Tommy might have gasped. He might even have cried out. Or perhaps he merely stood there, staring in silent horror.

In the distance, he could just make out the sound of Pam's scream.

Josh's eyes widened. He looked more surprised than anything else. He glanced down at the sword, and his mouth opened as if to say something, but all that came out was a rush of blood.

No.

This couldn't be happening.

Please. *Please.*

“*No!*” Like an arrow released from a bow, Tommy sprinted forwards. He shoved Dream away, almost knocking him to the ground, and seized the discarded sword. With a sweep of the blade, the ropes were falling away from Josh, and he crumpled forwards into Tommy's arms.

Together, they sank to the floor. Josh was as white as paper, still trying to speak past the blood pooling in his mouth. He gasped and coughed, choking on the stuff as it welled up in his throat.

“Shh, don't talk-” Tommy's hands were shaking, his breath shallow. “Hold on, just- hold on, *please* -” He pressed his hands over the wound, trying to keep pressure on it, fighting to stem the gushing blood, but it was just too big. “I'll- I'll fix this, I *promise* - you're gonna be alright-”

Josh flinched in pain, his gaze fixed on Tommy's face, eyes half-lidded.

This isn't real , Tommy told himself desperately. Thick blood was soaking his clothes, blossoming over Josh's front. *This is another one of Dream's mind tricks, it has to be, please-*

But it didn't feel like one.

"You see, Tommy," Dream said quietly, the eyes of his mask boring holes into Tommy's soul. "There's a reason those attachments mean so much to you. That's what makes them dangerous, right?" He chuckled. "Sure, while you've got them, you've got hope. But once they're gone? What's left for you then?" Idly, he nudged Josh in the side with the toe of his boot, ignoring Tommy's snarl of fury. "Even the most stubborn of people can be broken. And eventually, they're not going to be able to piece themselves back together."

Tommy was barely listening. All of his attention was concentrated on Josh, on the way that his breathing was beginning to slow, his heartbeat growing weaker.

"*Dream!*" He shouted, and his voice broke into a sob. "I'll do whatever you want, I don't care!" Hastily, he ripped off his chestplate, flinging it across the floor. It lay still at Dream's feet, pathetic and unmoving. "Give him the healing potion, *please!* "

Head tilted, Dream withdrew the potion from his inventory. "Communicator too, Tommy. Then I'll give this to you."

Tommy could feel the tears cutting streaks through the grime on his face as he tore the communicator from his wrist. He hurled it towards his tormentor and watched it fall to the ground as Josh coughed and shuddered.

Slowly, deliberately, Dream raised his boot, and stepped down on it, crushing the little communicator to shards of glass and redstone.

"*Please.*" Tommy didn't know if the word came out as a whisper or a scream.

Dream glanced towards him, and- just for a second- Tommy felt as if he could see through the mask. The face that stared him down was not one built of cold, merciless porcelain; it was pale and living and contorted with vicious, bitter anger. The eyes- poison green, acid bright- *burned* with a cruel triumph.

He stretched out his hand, the one holding the potion, and Tommy reached for it, stretched as far as he could, and then-

And then Dream snapped his arm back, like a child playing a game of keep-away, and the potion was gone and Tommy's hand closed on empty air.

"I don't think so."

The voice was empty and icy and sharp as a honed razor. "You should have listened to me when I gave you a chance. You didn't." There was no humor in his laugh. "This is your fault, all of it. Your friend is going to die- because of *you* ."

Because of me .

Josh gasped faintly, the blood gurgling in his chest. Tommy seized his hand, held him close, and shut his eyes tight.

His own heartbeat was pounding in his ears, as loud as the rumble of a thunderbolt. But it was not quite loud enough to drown out the soft, wavering sound of a shallow breath.

It was not followed by another.

Because of me .

Everything felt suddenly very far away.

He was clinging to Josh as though his life depended on it, as though somehow, through sheer force of will, he could drag him back into existence. The wind began to play on his face,

swirling through the warehouse, and Tommy barely noticed it, lost in the tossing waves of grief and pain.

The air grew hotter and hotter as his thoughts began to spiral, carried on the air, rising from his very skin.

Because of me .

Dimly, he was aware of Dream looking at him, staring with a sudden uncertainty as the heat began to spread through the room. “Tommy-”

A great *crash* echoed through the warehouse as the gusts of wind grew stronger, sweeping through the space with enough force to slam the doors shut. He ignored it, ignored everything, ignored the way that his veins were tracing themselves red-hot, ignored the gale that was beginning to whirl around him.

Because of me .

The tears on his face were evaporating, lost amid the sparks that flew from his glowing skin. The winds were rising, swirling around him, faster and faster, howling like a hurricane, drowning out the screams-

It was too much. It was all too much.

Tommy clutched Wilbur close, shuddering with the agony of loss, and his eyes flew open.

Behind him, in a rush of gold and scarlet feathers, his wings burst free, shredding through the back of his shirt. They spread wide, alight with fire, holding firm in the face of the storm, glowing more brightly than ever before.

His mother could be as cold and remote as she could be gentle and kind. She granted peace to the dying of her domain, guiding them gently toward whatever lay beyond. Her grief lay in the celebration of a life lived and left behind, of the wonder and possibility that awaited.

But Tommy?

Tommy was *fire*, and *hope*, and the people who lived in the face of despair, who burned to ashes in their pain and yet carried on. His mother’s gift was more than just wings. It was

unique, precious, the fire that burned within the depths of a soul, that kept *fighting* , that struggled endlessly against the inevitable and clung irrevocably to the strange little thing called *life* .

That fire was uncontrollable, unstoppable. It carried soldiers to battle and brought them back home, it drove healers to unfathomable lengths to save the dying, it gave parents the raw strength to lift fallen trees off their children. It was the sheer power of *life* , encompassed within the spirit of Death's own son, and released in a rush of golden flame.

And now, that fire was awake.

Wilbur- *Josh* was dead, and Tommy had not saved him.

Because of me.

The screams grew louder as the flames erupted to life. Tommy didn't really care.

He had burned down everything that he had left in his wake.

And Josh- *Wilbur* was dead.

At least, this time, they would burn together.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Hope you're all doing well! This took a bit longer, but we hope you like it! We're looking forward to all your theories and predictions :D

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, sorry for leaving you hanging for so long, but we're back! This chapter is pretty long so buckle up!

Something on the ground was glittering.

Or- not quite glittering. More like... rippling, shining with light that rushed across its surface in little glowing waves.

Either way, it was bright and angular; shaped like a miniature star, about the size of his palm.

How strange, he thought, hazily, that such a horrific being could have left behind such a beautiful little remnant.

There was no doubt that the star had belonged to that three-headed monstrosity. It had taken them almost an hour to finally kill it- an hour of flashing lightning and crashing explosions, and hurling weapon after weapon at the skulls that seemed to be its heads. An hour of piercing agony whenever one of its terrifying projectiles soared just a shade too close, leaving them with eerie particles rising from skin that felt as if it were about to melt from their bones.

But they had won. They had defeated it.

And- in the midst of its inhuman howls, as it had crumbled to a pile of smoking bones- that little star had fallen from some hollow within its ribcage. The bones had dissipated into clouds of filthy dust, swept away by the rising wind- but the star, whatever it was, remained.

Idly, Tony watched the mesmerizing shimmer. The thing was just lying there on the dirty tarmac, perfectly still, save for the waves of light. And it was so small.

He wondered distantly if it could be used for anything. It reminded him vaguely of the Tesseract; perhaps it was some kind of energy source? It could even be the fuel that powered whatever force fields the offworlders had placed on their armor and weapons- the two had the same shimmering effect.

Or maybe it was worthless. A pretty token, one that happened to be left behind after the monster died. Like some kind of achievement in a video game.

Somehow, at that moment, it didn't seem to matter very much. All he could do was sit at the edge of the battlefield, leaning against a lamppost, feeling utterly numb. All around him, people were scurrying back and forth, their hands filled with medical supplies or research equipment. There was a rumbling in the distance as a team of construction workers fought to keep yet another apartment block from collapsing in on itself, totally wrecked by the effects of the explosions.

“We’re losing her!”

The shout echoed across the concrete, and he glanced up, his heart plummeting in his chest.

The first responders had been on the scene almost before the creature was dead. Even as the dust was clearing, SHIELD’s medics were working; dragging an exhausted Thor toward the ambulance to apply pressure bandages, and prying Tony out of his suit to dress his wounded shoulder.

Amazingly, everyone had made it through the fight alive. Whether that would hold true, however...

“I don’t understand what’s going on!” Any professional calm had evaporated from the medic’s voice now; he sounded frantic. “Her vitals just keep dropping!”

Wanda lay on a stretcher, her eyes closed, surrounded by a crowd of people in white coats. Already, an army of machines had been set up around her; blinking monitors, IV bags, oxygen canisters, and gods knew what else. But despite the doctor's best efforts, it was clear that she was slipping away.

Vision was hovering beside her, his hands wrapped around hers. He looked pale and exhausted and was staring unblinkingly at the monitors- as if they would stop altogether the second that he looked away.

It was the effect of those awful projectiles, Tony was sure. Wanda's force fields had restrained the monster, and undoubtedly saved the lives of everyone in the city, but they had all seen what it had cost her.

A sick feeling of guilt was beginning to crawl into his belly, spreading through his veins like poison. Wanda had given everything to protect them, and what had he done? He had been useless- *worse* than useless- totally immobilized in the confines of his ravaged armor, a deadweight, getting in the way. It was only thanks to Peter that he was alive in the first place, and even then, he had been unwillingly keeping the kid on the battle scene as Peter had hauled Tony out of harm's way. For the second time that day.

As the fight had raged on, he had worked furiously to do something, *anything* - reboot the armor, release the hydraulics that kept him pinned down, even reactivate Jarvis. And absolutely nothing had worked. His own perfect mechanics had been turned against him, leaving him helpless. A trident that channeled lightning... It was almost impressive, how thoroughly that woman had defeated him.

If only he had been more careful. If only he had thought faster, fought better- not underestimated their foes...

The cloud of doubt and self-hatred was not unfamiliar. These were thoughts that raced wildly through his mind after every battle, each time he looked around him to see ruined buildings and wounded people, each time they pronounced victory over a wasteland. This time, however, it was accompanied by a guilt so strong that it threatened to crush him.

Wanda was dying, and there was absolutely nothing that he could do to help.

“Wait!”

There was a scuffle as a figure began to push through the mass of medics that surrounded the stricken hero. Tony looked up, eyes narrowed. He had thought that Peter was supposed to be assisting the evacuations- what on earth was he doing back here?

Either way, the kid was shoving his way to Wanda’s side. “Come on, move! *Let me through!*”

He had something in his hand, Tony realized. A glass vial of some kind of pinkish liquid. Where had he gotten that from?

Before he could get up, the kid had reached Wanda. Without hesitation, Peter lifted her head, unstopped the vial, and poured whatever was inside into her mouth.

For a moment, there was utter silence, as everyone stared at him in abject horror. And then-

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?”

Vision was on him in a heartbeat, dragging Peter away from the stretcher. He looked furious, beside himself; his usually calm face twisted beyond recognition in his rage. His hands were clamped around the kid’s wrists, holding him still. “*What did you give her?*”

“It’s- it’s just-” Peter stuttered out, obviously frightened as he stared up at the enraged A.I. Tony made to stand up, his head spinning with shock, but before he could take a step forward, Steve was there.

“Woah, hang on-” Hastily, he laid a hand on Vision’s shoulder, clearly anxious that their friend was on the point of losing control entirely. “Calm down. Things are bad enough as they are. We don’t need any more fights, and certainly not between ourselves, you hear me?”

Tony would have rolled his eyes. He couldn't deny, though, that there was something grounding about Steve's words; something sturdy and stern.

Unfortunately, Vision clearly didn't feel the same. Disregarding Steve entirely, he gave Peter a shake, glaring down at him, eyes wide with fury and terror. "Tell me what you gave her!"

"I- please-"

To Tony's relief, a shout cut across Peter's terrified stammer. One of the medics was staring at the monitors in wide-eyed amazement, a syringe held loosely in one hand. "She's stabilizing!" He shook his head, reaching out to take Wanda's pulse, and then nodded. "Vitals are normalizing."

Vision's reaction was instant. He released Peter without a second glance and raced back to Wanda's side. His red-tinged skin had paled to a blotchy pink, and he clasped her hand in both of his own as he studied the screens.

The surge of relief left Tony feeling almost light-headed. *She's stabilizing*. Wanda would be alright. His own stupidity had not cost another life. He wasn't about to lose another friend.

He couldn't restrain a faint trickle of disappointment, though- Vision's behavior had been entirely out of line. What on earth had driven him to start threatening Peter? Tony had raised him better than that, surely!

And- oh god. Peter.

With a quiet grunt of pain, Tony hauled himself to his feet, trying to avoid jostling his injured arm. As fast as he could, he moved to Peter's side, wincing as his whole body protested. "You okay, kid?"

“Yeah.” Despite his reassurance, Peter still looked shaken. He raised one hand, retracting the material of his suit until he could inspect his own wrist. Tony frowned at the sight of an ugly purple bruise beginning to form where Vision had grabbed him: clearly, the A.I. had been using every inch of his strength. He made a mental note to have a very strongly-worded chat with Vision.

It was a chat that could wait, though- at least until Wanda was recovered, and they had subdued the bastards that had hurt her.

“Peter?” A new voice broke through Tony’s thoughts, and he glanced up to see Steve, who had obviously been preparing to try and break up the impending fight. Now, though, he looked a little calmer, and his tone was almost gentle as he turned to face Peter. “This isn’t an attack, but you need to tell me exactly what was in that vial.”

“Oh- yeah. The vial?” Peter looked a little uncomfortable. “It’s- yeah, well... the thing is...”

He ducked his head, not meeting either of their gazes. Steve’s expression was growing sterner, though he was evidently doing his best not to let it show. “Where did you get it from, Peter?”

“It’s nothing bad! It’s just- uh...”

Worry was beginning to flare in Tony’s chest now. Where *had* the kid got the medicine from? Why was he so nervous about it? Surely, it had to be one of Banner’s creations or something- who else could make a healing solution that powerful? Maybe it was one of Strange’s experiments with some dodgy magic? But even then, the stuff had clearly worked. What was Peter not telling them?

“Kid, neither of us is gonna hurt you.” He said. “But you need to tell us what it was, *now* .”

“I- okay, I’ll... I’ll tell you. But promise that you won’t freak out!” The words tumbled out in an anxious rush, and Peter glanced up at them, his face pale.

A headache was rapidly gathering behind Tony's eyes. "Just... spit it out, kid."

"Uh- you saw the pink-haired alien, the guy with that scary-looking skull?" Peter was speaking so quickly that it was difficult for Tony to follow. "Well, he kinda beat me up a bit, but then he pulled off my mask and he looked a bit surprised, and then he pulled out this glass thing, like a flask or something-" He paused for breath, shooting an anxious glance over towards the stretcher where Wanda was beginning to come to. "And he threw it at the ground and it *exploded*, right, but it was all these weird particles, and it helped me! Like it healed all of my injuries, I felt way better afterward! I mean, I heal fast, but this was like, crazy fast. He called it a healing potion, and he said that it was even stronger if you drank it and he gave me an extra one-" Here, Peter hesitated, looking even more worried. "So when I saw Wanda just getting worse and worse- and you all thought that she was going to die... I mean, I figured it couldn't hurt, right?"

Steve was looking slightly overwhelmed by the rambling rush of words, and Tony could hardly blame him. "Wait..." He said, slowly, as if to confirm that he had heard correctly. "You gave Wanda some kind of offworlder medicine? Medicine that the enemy just *gave* you?"

"Well... It worked, didn't it?" Peter still looked nervous.

"But, hang on-" Finally, Tony's numb brain had finished sorting through the tangled story. "Kid, you drank that yourself?" His voice sounded suddenly frantic as the magnitude of the situation caught up with him.

"I mean, I didn't exactly *drink* it- I didn't have much of a choice-"

"*Peter!*" Tony exclaimed, seizing the kid by one armored shoulder and trying to shake some sense into him. His bad arm ached at the sudden motion, but he ignored it. "Your aunt will murder me!"

"Medics!" Steve shouted immediately, glancing around for anyone not gathered around Wanda.

But Tony interrupted him. "No! They've got no idea what to look for in a normal hospital." He waved away the nurse who hurried over to them, white coat flapping in the wind. "We'll take him to Banner- I have everything we need back at the tower."

"You don't have to-" Peter was frowning at the pair of them. "I feel perfectly fine!"

"Alright, kid, be quiet. I'll believe you in an hour's time, once we've run a full analysis." Tony shot him a stern glare, effectively ending the discussion.

Five hours later, a group of worn-out heroes had gathered around a glossy table sitting right at the heart of the Avengers Tower.

Fury had joined them, still holding an ice pack against the dark bruise on his cheekbone. He had seated himself beside Barton, whose face and arms were covered with slender, narrow cuts that almost resembled huge cat scratches. Fortunately, most of them were shallow, and whatever claws had caused the damage had clearly not been poisoned. Though that didn't mean that the injuries wouldn't be stinging like hell, despite the ointments and bandages that covered them.

"It was like the kid just went- went *feral*, or something."

Tony had heard Barton talking to Sam, with an odd mixture of resentment and sadness in his voice. "I didn't know what to do- I just kept refusing to pick up my weapons, and eventually he just dropped his own and went at me empty-handed. It wouldn't have been a problem if he didn't have *claws*."

Sam shook his head. "At least he wasn't toying with you a hundred feet up in the air- god, I thought I was a goner when that guy dropped me."

Tony himself had his shoulder braced in a cast, and several bright blue medicinal plasters covering his shallower wounds. His arm was still aching, but he was pleased to find that the brace itself made for a surprisingly convenient snack holder. Idly, he reached for another handful of cranberries- definitely not his preferred snack, but Peps had insisted that they were good for him.

“Good for blood loss,” She had said, pressing the bowl of fruit into his good hands with a warm, weary smile.

He had matched it with a smile of his own- though he suspected that he looked even more tired than she did. All of the Avengers were looking pale and exhausted after the battle; beneath the bandages and medicine, nobody had really managed to get any proper rest.

Rubbing his good hand over his face, Tony glanced around. “Where’s Thor?” He asked, to nobody in particular.

“Still sulking.” Natasha’s gaze flicked to the dimmest corner of the room. Thor was hunched over in a chair, nursing a beer and scowling deeply. “Apparently, he challenged one of the offworlders to a battle for honor. And then he lost.”

Peter was hovering next to Thor, clearly torn between wanting to console the god, and wanting to avoid him at all costs. The two of them seemed to be in the best shape out of all of them, though Tony knew that this was only due to Thor’s godly healing abilities. And the “healing potion”, whatever it really was, that the kid had taken.

In the opposite corner, Vision was also brooding, his eyes dark and hands clasped together. Tony was still angry with him, though the feelings were beginning to subside now that the worst of the danger had passed. Wanda was still in recovery, but as far as he knew, she was out of the woods now. Her recovery had been much faster than anyone expected, and Tony was fairly certain that the contents of that little pink vial were the reason.

“Okay, everyone! Settle down!”

Steve's firm call broke Tony from his thoughts. Trust him to start bringing some order to the place. "Let's actually start this meeting!"

Slowly, with a little more chivvy, the tired-out heroes gathered around the main table. Steve pulled a tablet towards himself as they sat down, though it took him a moment to get the screen running. The former soldier frowned as he struggled with the technology before he finally managed to pull up a slideshow of pictures.

The images of the offworlders that they had faced floated before them, blurry and unfocused- the best that they had been able to take, given the circumstances of the battle. The fever-bright eyes and sharp grin of the woman with the trident glared out through droplets of holographic rain as Steve spoke again. "Alright. Let's summarise. What do we know about these people, where did they come from, and- most importantly- why are they here?"

"Well, we *know* pretty much nothing." Fury's expression was thunderous as he answered, brows drawn tightly together.

"What about the two that you have in custody? Did you get anything out of them?" Natasha asked, glancing towards the commander. "I'm sure I could get them talking, if necessary."

"A generous offer," Fury replied, with the faintest strain of sarcasm in his voice. And then, he gritted his teeth. "But no. They escaped."

Every head whipped around to stare at him as a stunned silence spread across the table. Expressions ranged from shock to disbelief, to horror as everyone waited for Fury to elaborate. Infuriatingly, he remained silent, his jaw set and arms folded.

"They *what*?" Tony exclaimed, hoping against hope that, somehow, he had misheard.

"They ran away!" Fury snapped, clearly just as frustrated as the rest of them. Unfortunately, Tony was in no mood to spare his feelings.

“So you’re telling me that you had two of the most potentially dangerous beings on the planet locked up all safely in the Triskelion, and they managed to just *run away* ?” Fury’s scowl was deepening into a glower, his face a stark warning. But Tony had never really been one to listen to warnings. “How the *hell* did you lose them? What did you do, just put them in a room and asked them kindly not to go anywhere?”

“Tony-” Steve leaned forwards, raising a placating hand, but Tony ignored him.

“No, I want to know!” He didn’t break eye contact with Fury, glaring across the table, his palms pressed to the glossy surface. “How *exactly* do two offworlders, who by all accounts were locked up in the most secure facility on Earth, manage to *escape* ?”

Suddenly, Fury jerked forwards, as though about to lunge across the table and punch Tony square across the jaw for his insubordination. But, half a second later, he seemed to think better of it, and settled back into his seat. “They had help,” He said, darkly. “From an insider. And all the initial reports suggest that some kind of mind control was at play.”

Silence fell across the room once more. Slowly, Tony sat back down, eyes still narrowed despite his racing thoughts. He knew perfectly well what everyone was thinking about: the incident was eerily similar to what had happened the last time their planet had been invaded by a certain megalomaniac god.

Two seats away, Barton winced in understanding, his fists suddenly clenched. Tony glanced down at the table as he remembered. Of course, Hawkeye wouldn’t exactly respond well to news of mind control. On his other side, Natasha gave his shoulder a squeeze of silent reassurance.

“Right.” Steve, as usual, was the one to restore a sense of order. “Let’s- Let’s just focus on what we do know.” There was another moment of silence as people turned to look at him. “Who are they, and what can they do?”

For the first time, Thor cleared his throat. He was sitting right at the end of the table, re-threading the damaged laces on his right arm guard, but he nodded toward the holographic images. Floating silently in mid-air was an image of the first offworlder to enter through the portal: the man who wore a boar skull as a mask, whose axe had deflected a lightning bolt. In

the picture, he was rising from the ground, head tilted back in wild triumph as gold and green sparks showered down around him. His sword gleamed hungrily in the flickering lights.

“That one,” Thor said, tugging the worn leather threads tight. “He introduced himself as the Blood God, though that is an earned title. His true name is Technoblade, and his taken name is Protesilaus.” He glanced up from the arm guard, staring at the image of their enemy. “He’s as strong as I am, and we are well-matched in combat.”

“Just our luck,” Sam muttered. “Of course, the first guy to invade us after Loki is called the *Blood God* .”

“And the woman-” Thor broke off, scowling grimly. Tony couldn’t help a quiet huff of agreement- whoever she was, she had managed to defeat them both. “That trident of hers is a lightning summoner, a twin to Mjolnir. I am certain that she, too, is a god- perhaps a deity of war, or of wrath?”

“Sounds ominous.” Though Barton’s tone was light, his eyes were shadowed. “The god theory would make sense, though. Explains how the guy with the mask could take an arrow straight through his head and get back up again.” He sighed. “But I barely even fought him. The kid that they sent after me was named- something like Ranboo. And- I don’t know. He could teleport, I saw that much. But the other guy, the bastard with wings- I didn’t catch his name.”

“Neither did I,” Sam interjected. “But he’s bad news. He was absolutely fucking ruthless, didn’t even hesitate before trying to drop me to my death. And he’s just as good an archer as you, Clint.” He hesitated and shrugged. “At least he didn’t seem to have any abilities beyond, you know, the *wings* .”

“I think his name might be Phil.” An eager voice chimed in, and everyone turned to face Peter. “And the woman was called Niki- at least, that’s what Boar guy- uh, Technoblade- said.”

“You seem to have gotten very well acquainted,” Vision said softly. Though his voice sounded calm, the accusation in his eyes as he glanced toward Peter was obvious.

Looking suddenly uncomfortable, Peter shifted in his seat. “That’s- well... They kinda just stopped trying to kill me once they got my mask- I don’t-”

Vision’s eyes narrowed, but before he could open his mouth, Tony interrupted him. “Leave the kid alone, Vision.”

The A.I. glared, but Tony continued on regardless. “You do realize that, if he hadn’t stepped in, Wanda could be dead right about now?”

He knew that the words were harsh, and probably uncalled for. But Vision’s blatant hostility towards Peter was beginning to infuriate him, and they didn’t have time for an all-out argument. Sure, the kid had been reckless, and sure, he had scared the hell out of all of them when he’d given Wanda the medicine- not to mention Tony’s panic when he’d found out that Peter himself had taken it. But Wanda was healing, and Peter was still alive, and none of the tests that they had run had shown anything toxic or poisonous. In fact, the only anomaly that they had found was unusually high levels of lycopene in both of their bloodstreams, which- according to Banner- was a harmless molecule found in fruits like tomatoes or melons.

Either way, they had all made it through alive. And if Tony had to be sharp about getting Vision to leave Peter alone, then that’s what he would do.

To his surprise, Vision actually flinched at the words. The A.I. shot him a glare, leaning forwards across the table. “He gave her an unknown substance that he received from the enemy!”

“Machine,” Thor said, turning to face Vision. “The spiderling is not at fault. If he had not been there, then both me and Sam would currently be celebrating in the halls of Valhalla.” Thoughtfully, he tested the relaxed arm guard, stretching out the leather threads. “He fought on bravely, even when the rest of us had fallen.”

Vision gritted his teeth, looking ready to argue further. Fortunately, Steve stepped in once again. “Ok, that’s enough. All of you. We’re all on the same side here.” He frowned, sending stern glances towards both Vision and Tony, and continued before the latter could start on an indignant retort. “What do we know about their objectives?”

“They asked for something,” Sam said, pressing the heel of his hand against his temple. “Didn’t they?”

“It was *someone*,” Fury corrected him. “A boy named Theseus- or Tommy, as I suspect they actually call him. Daredevil mentioned him too. Apparently, he was taken from his home world by another two offworlders, who are currently also at large in our world.”

“And they think we have him?” Barton pinched the bridge of his nose, looking as though a nasty headache had started up behind his eyes.

“It would appear so, yes.”

“And what information do we have on the kid himself?” Steve asked, tapping awkwardly at the tablet to begin searching through the files. “Do we know where he is?”

“We’re looking for him as we speak,” Fury replied, shaking his head. “But we have little to no information about what he really looks like. We’re not even fully certain that the boy is really here, in this world.”

“What do we do, then?” Natasha asked, her face set.

“Well, we can’t give them what they’re looking for. By their own declaration, peace is off the table.” Fury replied grimly. “But we can’t just leave them alone- they’re too dangerous for that.” He sighed quietly through his nose. “We’re going to have to take them down. Whatever means necessary.”

Once again, silence fell. Out of the corner of his eye, Tony could see grim looks being exchanged, and quiet nods shared. *Whatever means necessary*. This fight would not be easy. There was a very high chance, in fact, that they wouldn’t all make it through this one alive. At least now they had a few more shreds of information. They had a little room to prepare, ready themselves properly, and perhaps even reach out for reinforcements. The war was not yet over.

“Do we have any idea where they’re hiding out?” Steve asked, passing the tablet over to Fury.

“Fortunately, we do.” With a few deft motions, Fury pulled up a blinking map of the city. Blinking dots were scattered across it, flashing their way down the roads or glowing softly in the outlines of buildings. With a wave of his hand, he indicated a row of squat buildings along the waterfront. “*Somehow*. We managed to get footage from the city CCTV. We lost them a couple of times, but we were able to track them to an abandoned storage facility down by the docks.”

“But we will not be able to fight them alone a second time,” Thor announced. “Not against *two* gods. We need the Hulk.”

“*No* .”

Everyone looked around. Banner was leaning against the doorframe, still wearing his unbuttoned lab coat. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes, and his arms were folded across his chest. Judging by the paper-filled notebooks that stuck out from the bag slung across his shoulder, he had just made his way up from the lab.

“Definitely not,” He continued, seemingly unperturbed by the stares. “You all saw the damage that monster did. Can you imagine that, coupled with the Hulk? We might stand a better chance of winning, but we’ll take half of the damn city down with us.” He shook his head, resolutely. “I’ll be here, trying to seal that portal. You lot can handle the destruction.”

“Wait,” Barton said, suddenly. “Hold on.”

Curiously, Tony glanced toward him. To his faint surprise, Barton’s steely expression had faded, replaced by something that looked almost like shock. “We’ve forgotten something.”

Sam frowned. “What?”

“The offworlders. They have kids with them- at least two of them definitely aren’t fully grown.” He stared around, taking in the expressions of incredulity and disbelief, and his face hardened. “They’re teenagers! We can’t just attack with them in the line of fire!”

Natasha’s eyes narrowed. “That’s not how it works, Clint. They’ve chosen their side.”

“They’re kids, Nat! God knows what happened to them in their world! We have to get them out!”

“I can do that!”

Tony’s stomach sank as Peter stood up eagerly. “I can-”

“No, you can’t, Parker! Sit down!” Internally, Tony felt a flicker of guilt; the words had come out harsher than he had really meant.

“But, Mr. Stark-”

“God, kid! No buts!” A surge of frustration raced through Tony’s mind. Why the hell did Parker have to be so stubborn, so reckless? Why couldn’t he just keep himself out of harm’s way, keep up his *friendly neighborhood Spiderman* work, and leave the real fights to the people trained to handle them? Why did he have to keep throwing himself into situations that never failed to leave Tony feeling sick with guilt that he had let a teenager get so badly hurt? *Especiall*y now, when Tony himself was injured- who would rush in to help if things went wrong? “I can’t let you-”

“Wait- Tony.”

Steve’s voice broke through his wild train of thoughts. “Slow down. Let’s hear him out, first.” Though the former soldier’s voice was steady, he winced at the sight of Tony’s furious expression as the billionaire whipped around to stare at him.

“You’re even *considering* this? Have you gone insane?”

“Actually, I have to agree with Tony on this one,” Barton said quietly. “Are we really sending in a kid to rescue the other kids?”

“Yeah, but- but that’s kinda the *point* .” Across the table, Peter had stood up. “Who do you think they’ll trust more, me or a group of random adult strangers?” His face was set with determination, and he leaned forwards as he spoke.

“And besides,” Steve continued, giving Tony a look. “He’s not even going to be fighting any of them. All he has to do is slip in and get the kids out.”

“Exactly! I’ll be totally safe, Mr. Stark-”

“Peter,” Tony began and hesitated. God, that kid was too selfless for his own good. And too reckless and stubborn to stop and *think*, to look around and see the danger that he was throwing himself headlong into. Tony almost wanted to scream with frustration.

He could see it now. Himself, already exhausted, forbidding Peter to go anywhere near the off-worlders again. Steve would rebuff him. Peter would be furious, and- even worse- he wouldn’t see *why*. He’d take it personally, and he’d blame Tony, and then of course he would simply go in and try to save the damn kids anyway, and probably get himself killed in the process. And he’d have no backup to rush in to help because he wouldn’t have told anybody that he was going, because Tony had told him not to go!

“Mr. Stark.”

Tony didn’t raise his head. “Yeah, kid?”

“Someone needs to get the other kids out of danger. I mean, we have no idea what they’ve been through- they could be, uh, brainwashed, or-” He hesitated, looking suddenly unsure of himself. A moment later, though, he seemed to steel himself, and his face filled with fresh resolve. “I’m their best chance, sir. You have to let me go in. None of us are going to get hurt.”

Rubbing one hand over his eyes, Tony cursed quietly and repeatedly under his breath. Without looking up at any of them, he muttered, “I still don’t like this.”

“Neither do I.” Steve replied, gravely. Setting his jaw, he glanced across the table to where Peter was sitting, his head raised in triumph and determination. “But this is the best we can do,” He continued. “Once all the kids are out and safe, we’ll attack again. And this time, we’ll be prepared.”

“We’re still missing information.”

Everyone glanced around. Vision’s quiet voice sounded from the other end of the table as he continued. “What else did we get from the tests that we ran on the offworlder medicine? And on the remnant that the monster left behind?” He looked over towards Banner as he spoke, his eyes bright with scrutiny.

Banner himself had taken a seat, his lab coat folded neatly on the table before him. It took him a moment to withdraw his notes from his bag, and he flicked through them as he spoke. “Well, the results from the analysis that we ran on both Peter and Wanda are in.” He placed the file on the table, pages spread for everyone to look at. The paper was covered with scrawled notes, equations, arrows, circles, and rough little graphs. Nobody but Vision and Tony bothered to actually try to understand them.

“And they’ve both made a complete recovery,” He continued, with a glance towards Peter. “As far as we can tell, the healing potions did exactly what they were supposed to. No side effects or hidden damage. Whatever technology went into making them is miles beyond anything we have here.”

Tony couldn’t help shooting a pointed look in Vision’s direction. Fortunately, the A.I. knew better than to take the bait and continued frowning at the notes.

“As for the remnant, the star- whatever you want to call it-” Banner continued, “It’s an energy source of some kind. A bit like the Tesseract, only much, much weaker, and- it’s hard to describe the readings. It’s as if- the Tesseract was an energy source in and of itself, right? Just, pure energy, compacted into itself. The star isn’t like that. It’s as though it’s drawing energy from somewhere else like a generator plugged into a much bigger source of power. Only we can’t tell what that bigger source is, or how it’s getting the energy to the star...”

He shook his head. “It’s fascinating, really. But it’s nothing that we can use- not yet, at least.”

“Okay.” Steve nodded thoughtfully. “That’s a start. What about the portal? Have we got anything on what it is, or how to close it?”

“Well... Not exactly,” Banner replied, a little hesitantly. “We lost quite a lot of equipment during the fight. But we managed to get most of it to safety, and even some of the stuff that got destroyed was streaming the recordings.” He delved back into his bag, withdrawing a small screen that glowed with scrolling text. “So we do have quite a bit of data. Turns out, the portal gives out signals on a wavelength that we can read, and those spike whenever someone’s actually passing through it. Six people going through generate plenty of disturbances on levels that we can’t even read yet, but most of it is a repeating pattern, and my theory is that-”

“Wait,” Tony interrupted him, suddenly. “Hang on. Go back a second.” A nasty feeling was beginning to trickle down his spine, and he couldn’t restrain a fervent hope that, once again, he had simply misheard. “*Six* people?”

Banner frowned, glancing back at his tablet. “Uh- yeah. Six people. Why-”

“Because,” Sam said, looking suddenly very uneasy, “We only saw five.”

Ghostbur blinked as he gazed around. Tall buildings surrounded him, reaching up and up until they seemed to brush the sky itself. The ground beneath him was paved with greying slabs, stretching out beside a dark, yellow-lined road. Around him, colorful signs were pasted across billboards and tacked up outside shops and cafés, all written in English.

In a distant corner of his mind, a familiar train of thought was beginning to stir back to life. *Somewhere in England itself, perhaps?* Slowly, he began to walk, taking in the style of the buildings, the designs of the streetlamps and dustbins, and the clothes of the people around him. *No, not England. America, then. New York?*

Briefly, memories surged; the flutter of maps beneath his fingers, the woody smell of mildewed books- and then blocks in his hands, painstakingly shaping the ground of a tiny new server, studying his notes to make sure that his replica was perfect- and then home again, pressing his pictures into Phil's hands and calling to Tommy, full of pride in the server that he had built. *That's it, there, that's Newfoundland!* And he'd brought things for Techno, too, filled his rucksack with every book that he didn't want- philosophy, literature, mythology- and hauled them up to Hypixel, where Techno spent his days out in his vast potato fields.

Alivebur had never found out where all of the knowledge was coming from, or how it had all ended up on Dream's server. He doubted that Alivebur had even known that *Earth* was a real place. His little fantasy world, brought to life with him standing in its midst.

It was beautiful, and strange, and most certainly *not* the way that Ghostbur had imagined it to be.

There were just so many *people* .

They filled the streets in great churning crowds, squeezed up against the buildings to avoid the great redstone boxes that hurled up and down the road. The air was filled with noise as they strode back and forth, peering in at the windows and tapping away at their communicators.

Strangely, they all walked right past him. Though not one of them glanced in his direction, each one of them avoided him with a neat sidestep or cautious shuffle, forming a little island of space around him.

No one looked at him.

Ghostbur felt a faint frown gather on his face, and did his best to replace it with a friendly smile. He raised a hand in a little wave. "Hello! I'm, uh- I'm Ghostbur! It's lovely to meet you!" Blinking, he looked back and forth and was met with nothing but blank gazes that slid unseeingly around him. "Would- would any of you like some blue?"

There was no response. Feeling slightly hurt, he stared hard at the ground. That was- that was rude of them. They didn't have to take the blue. But was it really that difficult for them to say hello?

He slipped a hand into his pocket, and his fingers were met by the soft, cool texture of the blue that always seemed to gather there. It seemed to grow warmer at his touch, and he couldn't help a slight smile. A moment later, he glanced up at the friendly faces around him and wondered briefly why none of them were looking at him.

It didn't matter, he decided. He didn't have time for idle chatter. His little brother was here, somewhere- he needed to find him!

But he definitely couldn't do it alone. First, to find Techno and Phil.

Quietly, he closed his eyes and allowed the tension to seep from his shoulders. This was a trick that he had only found out he could do a while ago, and it was one that came in very useful when he remembered to use it. Calmly, he leaned backward, forwards, and then he was off, eyes now half-lidded, drifting determinately towards a singular point, like a compass tip - dragged inexorably towards the north.

It was Kristin who had blessed him with this power, he was certain of it. And he knew that it could only lead him to one person. The Angel of Death.

He had only been moving for a minute, though, before the explosion sent his thoughts reeling.

Around him, any order that the streets had held abruptly disappeared. The orderly chaos descended into a mess of panic, as people began to run this way and that. A flicker of fear sparked in his chest at the sight, and the old, gnawing ache in his heart flared back to life. The explosion. The screams. The gleam of his father's sword in the dim light.

Hastily, his blood beginning to pound in his ears, he plunged a hand back into his pocket and scooped up a handful of blue, clenching it tightly in one fist. Someone almost brushed against him in their fright, and he spun around to try and see what they were running from...

Oh. Well. That was alright, then. The blue was warm against his skin as he put it away.

Techno, Phil, and Niki were racing down the street, armed to the teeth and leaving trails of potion particles in their wake. Ghostbur smiled as he took in the sight; he had been looking for Phil, hadn't he? Well, he must have done something right.

He wondered briefly why they were running. Maybe it was for the same reason that everyone else was?

Hastily, he sped up, gliding forwards to meet them, and falling into step beside Techno. He was relieved to see that the warrior looked unhurt, though there was an odd, glassy golden sheen over his left eye. What on earth had they been doing?

"Is- is that a Wither behind you?" He asked, quietly, knowing that Techno would be able to hear him- even over the rumble of explosions, and metallic clanking of his armor. "Are you going to destroy this city, too?"

Even as he spoke, Ghostbur could feel sadness pooling in his chest. He had rather liked this place, and he hadn't even gotten to see it all yet. It was loud and colorful, and he didn't want to see it burning. Not like L'Manberg.

"Heh ?"

Techno whipped around. He stared at Ghostbur in abject surprise, eyes widening at the sight of him. “What- what are *you* doing here?”

“Me?” Ghostbur smiled brightly. “I came to find Tommy! Kristin told me to follow you guys!”

For some reason, Techno’s face crumpled. He looked suddenly exhausted, overwhelmed, and Ghostbur watched him wrestle himself back under control. His jaw set as he resettled his mask, the weary conflict fading from his gaze with practiced ease. “Bruh,” he said, and shook his head. “Just- come with us, then, for now!”

“Alright!”

And so they ran.

Ghostbur lost track of time. The blue in his pocket grew warmer as the smoke began to drift overhead, and the wailing sirens started to blare out. Phil had taken to the skies a few minutes ago, seeking out a place for them to hide, but Ghostbur didn’t really listen. He simply followed Techno, moving without thinking, matching his brother step for step, and then, eventually, they stopped.

The building was dark and rusted at the corners, and it smelled damp and musty. The ground was nothing more than compacted dirt and sand with a few sheets of mouldy material on top, though it was difficult to see properly in the gloom.

Beside him, Ghostbur heard a click, and a *hiss*, and then Niki’s face was illuminated with firelight. Her hair shone almost red in the light as she held up the torch, staring around the room. She nodded. “Good find, Phil.” Briefly, she glanced over her shoulder at Techno, who was already beginning to check the perimeter. “I’ll set up some beds. Make sure to set your spawn- I don’t care if it’s hardcore.”

Techno hummed in agreement, before withdrawing a handful of wooden blocks and starting to barricade one of the dirty windows.

Quietly, Ghostbur watched them work. They made a good team, he thought; in different circumstances, the scene could almost have been peaceful. Phil had already set down a crafting table and ignited a smoker. He settled down to begin preparing their meal as Niki finished placing the beds, and turned instead to start setting up a small potato patch.

It all looked... strange, though. Here, in this world, everything felt slightly- out of proportion. It was hard to describe, Ghostbur mused, staring at the objects around him. The crafting table looked just a little too big, too- detailed? And the beds were much flatter, not like beds at all, just planks with woolen blankets draped over them. He had seen Niki frowning at them earlier, before seeming to shrug it off. After all, some servers did have unusual textures- perhaps this was simply one of those?

A cheerful voice broke him out of his thoughts. "Hey, Ghostbur!"

Ghostbur startled. "Wha-"

He glanced around to see Tubbo standing behind him, giving him a lopsided smile. Ranboo was next to him, one hand raised in a shy little wave.

"Hey, Tubs!" He blinked at the sight, surprise giving way to delight, and he raised one hand to wave back at Ranboo. "How did you-"

"Ranboo?" Techno's voice interrupted him. "Can- can the both of you have a quick scout around the perimeter? Just to check what we're dealing with, see if there's anythin' we can use."

"Uh- sure." Ranboo nodded quickly and gave Ghostbur an apologetic glance. "We can do that."

He didn't look back as he followed Tubbo towards the door.

Nobody else spoke to Ghostbur after that.

He couldn't hide a faint suspicion that Phil was ignoring him deliberately. His father refused to meet his gaze or even look in his direction, fighting to keep a horribly forced smile on his face. Niki, on the other hand, never missed a chance to shoot him a glare.

He did his best to keep out of their way, flitting from corner to corner. He wasn't quite certain how to take the open hostility. And, after all, he probably deserved it- he knew that he had wronged them, somehow, even if he couldn't remember how, or why. His last memory with Niki had been a happy one, though it was hard to remember with any clarity; there had been a bright, airy room filled with flowers, cheerful chatter, and the faint strumming of her guitar.

It must have been awful, the things that he had done. That Alivebur had done.

Hastily, feeling the familiar resentment beginning to well up in his chest, he scooted quietly up to Techno, seeking some shelter beneath the bastion of his brother's calm, unshakeable presence. But even that didn't feel quite right. Techno didn't ignore him- not the same way as Phil did, at least- but his words were clipped, his tone forced. He felt cold and distant, even as he nudged Ghostbur away from a leaky drainpipe, making sure that he didn't mistakenly burn himself.

He's worried about Tommy. We all are. That's all it is. The reassurance sounded hollow, even as he thought it.

"What can I help with?" He asked, knowing that his fingertips would already be stained blue. He wished, briefly, that Friend was here. "Should I go and scout as well?"

"Sure, man. Whatever you want." Techno didn't look at him- *he was just busy. He's focusing on what he's doing.* "Just don't get lost, alright? I don't want to have to look for you, too."

“I- I can do something else if you need me to?” Ghostbur offered. “We can go and look for Tommy together?”

“Just stay put, Ghostbur. Try not to get in the way, will you?”

“I- yeah... I can do that.”

And he tried, he really did. But every so often, he'd forget, and he'd reach out to help. *Don't stain this, Ghostbur, we'll need it for later. You're in the way. Stay a bit further back, there's water here. I'm fine, Ghostbur, just leave me alone!*

He didn't mean to. He really, really didn't.

He just wanted to be helpful.

He'd left them, in the end, slipping out through the door and into the dim sunset. He wouldn't be gone long, not that it would truly matter- just a quick walk by himself before he went back.

Nobody said anything as he disappeared into the shadows.

He sighed as he walked, and watched the air crystallize into a pretty mist before his eyes. Though he was fairly certain that the air was not so cold, he felt freezing, as though his soft sweater was drenched in icy water. His footprints, when he looked down, were outlined in a faint halo of blue that faded to nothing as he stepped away.

He missed Friend.

It didn't take him long to find a slightly shorter building. A frail-looking staircase zig-zagged its way up the side, and he climbed the steps in a slight daze. He loved heights, always had, even when he had been alive. A trait that he had probably gotten from his father, now that he

thought about it. In the past, it had always calmed him- swinging from trees as a child, or climbing the walls of L'Manberg. Being in the air had always helped him to clear his head.

Now, though, it only left him feeling isolated.

He stood on the edge of the rooftop, hands in his pockets, feeling the swirl of the wind around him. The city lay before him, all bright strings of lights and the echo of sirens in the distance. The oily, bitter taste of fumes from the redstone machines hung in the air.

Softly, he cleared his throat. "Am... Am I doing something wrong?"

His voice broke slightly on the last word, and he winced at the jab of shame. Alivebur would never have questioned himself. And he would never, ever have thought to seek affirmation from others. Not the Alivebur that he knew, at least.

But he was not Alivebur, and so he closed his eyes and he *listened*, and whispered, "Please?"

His mother didn't answer. Only... not because she, too, was ignoring him.

Unease stirred to life within his chest. Something was wrong.

He squeezed his eyes tightly closed and concentrated, opening his mind to the cries of the dead. Immediately, his head began to ache, but he fought to ignore it and pushed deeper, past the screams and howls of those battling to escape their fate.

Once, he would have shaken his head to hear them- Death, after all, was nothing to fear. Now, however, after everything, he was less certain. And their desperate pleas rang out within his mind as he searched, growing increasingly frantic- something was happening, something was terribly, terribly *wrong* -

Tommy.

There it was.

Tommy!

Her voice was oddly distant, as though she was shouting through layers and layers of Friend's wool. Ghostbur steeled himself and pushed even harder, regardless of the blue that began to drip slowly from his nose.

He's burning. He's burning!

There was no mistaking the panic in Kristin's call. Shock seized Ghostbur's chest like a frozen vice.

HELP HIM!

“ *Where ?*” He cried, aloud or in his head, it didn't matter. “Where do I need to go?”

There was no reply, but he didn't need one. Already, his eyes were closed, his mind seeking out the compass point within him, knowing that the steadfast, northbound arrow was shifting. Ghostbur had been gifted with a safety net of sorts, an eternal path back to safety- back home. But now, home was a father who ignored him, a brother who mistrusted him, and a friend who hated him. And somebody far more important needed his divine lifeline, and he would be damned if he didn't find his way to Tommy now.

A faint tug caught somewhere in his chest, and he followed it blindly, half running, half drifting, making his way deeper into the city. Tommy was out there. His little brother needed help.

“He’s done a good job of hiding,” Deadpool said bitterly, catching himself on the very edge of the rooftop. He hoisted himself up, swung around until he had a view of the city, and perched lightly on the edge. “Bastard took to Hell’s Kitchen’s underbelly like a spandex’ed vigilante in a crime-ridden city.”

They had been searching all day. Sapnap had insisted that, wherever Dream was, it would be tied to something dodgy- and here, that only meant one thing. And so they had worked together following up on any unexplained crime, anything connected to Kingpin or his minions, in the hopes of tracking him down. But, once again, the trail had gone cold.

“We’ll find him,” Sapnap grunted, lowering himself onto the rooftop beside Deadpool. “We will.” He narrowed his eyes in irritation as he stared down at the street below. The whole situation was beginning to get to him, and he was sick of Wade’s annoying, fourth-wall-breaking jokes. “What I don’t get is why we can’t just kill him when we do.”

You let him get away! You have to kill him! He’s going to hurt my SON!

Every step of the way, Dream had eluded them, just when they had thought that they were finally getting close. And the fucker was already several steps ahead of them; the news had started to spread through the city hours ago, like some noxious gas. *A bounty hunt, set by Kingpin himself. A prize beyond anyone’s wildest dreams. And all for one lanky, bratty teenage boy.* Soon, every criminal on the streets would be hunting Tommy down, and there was absolutely nothing that they could do about it. Unless they found Dream first.

My son is in danger! You have to find him, now! He’s going to kill my baby!

“I mean- look, if you want to do him in, go for it! Just don’t expect me to protect you from Daredevil afterward.” Wade tipped his head back with a sigh. “As cute as he is, he’s really annoying with his do-gooder *murder is bad* rule.”

Stop ignoring me! Find him! Find him now!

Suddenly, Wade's hand jerked forwards, as if to grab at the air. With a quiet snarl, he clenched his fingers into a fist and dragged it back, fighting to regain control. Resolutely, he continued to ignore the furious tantrum that the goddess was throwing, but this was really starting to piss him off.

There was nothing else he could do, not right now. No matter how much she screamed at him.

"Right. Great. So- what now? We just wait around until he gets his hands on Tommy?" Sapnap's voice pitched in anger, and he rose to his feet. "This is stupid- we're just wasting time!" He was pacing now, back and forth, like a beast in a cage. Wade couldn't help rolling his eyes. These off-worlders were so impatient.

"Calm down. I'm calling Goose to pick us up." He announced.

"Goose? The weirdo- uh, the guy with the yellow redstone thing?" Sapnap stared at him, his anger replaced briefly with confusion. "Aren't people supposed to be evacuating after the attack on the center?"

"Nah," Wade scoffed. "He's still here. Hasn't finished telling me all the latest news about Gita yet. Not like a terrorist attack can stop him." He was rather looking forward to seeing Dopinder again, he thought. Much easier to deal with the drama of Goose's love life than these damn off-worlders.

Sapnap nodded thoughtfully. "That guy genuinely cares more about his girlfriend breaking up with him than his city being obliterated. Gotta give him some respect, I guess." Looking slightly defeated, he dropped back down to the rooftop and stared out at the skyline. "Why is he asking you for love advice, though? I mean- no offense, dude, but that face of yours- it's one only a mother could love. Literally. My mother is fire incarnate, she can tell you."

"For shame!" Wade interrupted, feigning an offended gasp and choosing to gloss right over that last sentence. "I'll have you know that I have a superb personality to compensate."

Sapnap gave him a doubtful stare, and so he continued hastily, "And a huge d-"

“Alright, alright, I heard enough!”

Wade laughed and pulled out his phone. “What about you, then? You have someone?”

A smile spread across Sapnap’s face, an odd mixture of shy delight and open pride. “Yeah. Two someones, actually.” A moment later, though, his expression dimmed. “I’m, uh- not really sure how we stand at the moment, though.”

“Oh.” Wade hit send on the message to Dopinder and slipped his phone back into his pocket. “Drama?” Briefly, he glanced away from his companion, shooting a meaningful glance into thin air. A moment later, he sat back and pulled out a bag of popcorn, which he proceeded to nibble on as he listened to his companion.

“One of them- he’s just been growing more and more distant,” Sapnap started, his voice thoughtful and faintly bitter. “I don’t know, maybe it’s my fault, but- it was like he was backing away from us like he wasn’t really-” He broke off with a sigh. “Either way, he left. Just went off to do his own thing. And the other...” There was another pause. Deadpool chewed a handful of popcorn and nodded encouragingly. “The other is a time traveler, which would be great, only- every time he comes back, he’s not- not quite the same.”

“Hmm.” Deadpool gazed at him sagely. “That’s rough, buddy. I’d offer to help, but *apparently*, I’m not a credible source on the matter...”

“Oh, fuck off!” Sapnap spluttered. “I wasn’t asking for *advice*!”

“Sure, sure.” Rolling his eyes, Wade stood up and tossed the half-empty bag of popcorn behind him. “Let’s-”

His voice caught in his throat as his feet began to move. In the wrong direction.

You don't listen!

He stumbled slightly as he was dragged, inadvertently, back across the roof. Alarm rose in his chest as he struggled for control over his body, but that mad goddess had her claws in deep. Gritting his teeth, he was turned jerkily sideways, until he was staring out towards the opposite side of the city. His heart was beginning to race, and- to his shock- an odd ache was building up inside his lungs.

Look! Can you see?

And before he could shout at the goddess that he wasn't interested in another one of her tempers, he paused. Because he did see.

There, in the distance, a column of thick, black smoke was rising, billowing languidly into the air. He squinted at it, eyebrows raised, and then asked breathlessly, "Isn't the fight meant to be in the *other* part of town?"

"Uh- I guess? So?"

"*So*," Wade continued, past the growing pressure in his throat, "Why is there a building burning so far from all the action?"

Sapnap startled and spun around to look. "*Fuck !*" He shouted, dashing across the rooftop for a better view. "You mean Dream's probably there? What the hell are we waiting around for?"

Pain flared behind his ribcage, and Wade winced. His breathing was growing fast and labored, and he pressed a hand over his breastbone. What was going on? Nothing like this had happened to him, not since fate had turned him into this unfortunate sack of undying flesh. Now, though, his lungs felt as though they were filling with scorching smoke.

"Do you, ah, smell something burning?" He asked nobody in particular. It was getting hard to speak. His veins felt as though they were flowing with lava, and he wrapped his arms

protectively around his chest.

“What?” Sapnap was beginning to look worried.

“I- feels like my- my chest is *burning* -” Wade’s voice came out as a gasp, and he shuddered. “Like I’m being burned alive...”

What the *hell* was going on? What was happening to him?

“Are you- alright?” Sapnap asked hesitantly. He glanced around, clearly at a loss for anything to do in this situation. “Are you having a heart attack or something?” He frowned. “Do you smell toast?”

“What? No, I can’t be- I’m like Wolverine!” Wade declared, and immediately doubled over, overwhelmed with a coughing fit. His chest was *aching*, almost as though...

No. *No*. It wasn’t possible. Surely, she wouldn’t-

If you won’t save him, then I will do it myself.

He staggered as he took another involuntary step forwards.

That *bitch*, he thought, furiously. She was trying to descend!

“Not *happening*, Lady!” He shouted, ignoring the fresh wave of pain. “I did *not* sign up for this!”

“What’s going on?” Sapnap asked, sounding frantic.

But before he could answer, Wade was taking another step forward. The world began to swirl around him, tilting in and out of focus, and he couldn't even shake his head to clear it. Somewhere in the distance, the sound of his own voice echoed back to him. "Let's go save Tommy- he needs our help!"

And then, there was a blur of movement, a driving pressure, and finally, more pain, blooming warmly across his stomach. This pain, however, was familiar- one that he had felt many times before. Slowly, his vision cleared, and his thoughts began to settle. Slowly, he became aware of the blood seeping over his hands and glanced downwards.

He was not surprised to see the glint of his sword, thrust right through the flesh of his stomach.

"What the *fuck* is wrong with you?" Sarnap looked horrified as he yanked the katana away from Wade. The blade clattered to the ground as the hunter began to apply pressure to the wound, and- with his other hand- drew a small, clear flask of shimmering pink liquid from thin air. But before he could even get the bottle open, Wade threw out a hand to stop him.

"It's fine! It'll heal on its own!" Doing his best to straighten up, Wade grinned weakly. "Trust me."

Sarnap shot him a glance of pure incredulity but cautiously lifted his hands away from the gaping wound. To his evident surprise, the gush of blood had already stopped, leaving a stretch of shining scab across what had, barely a moment ago, been a lethal injury.

"See?" Grin widening, Wade took a step forwards and immediately stumbled. "*Ah* - it's, uh, quite a big wound, though. It's gonna take some time to heal up fully. Give me a hand?"

Sarnap shook his head in disbelief, even as he gripped Wade's arm for support. "Why did you do that? Are you *crazy*?"

“No reason!” Wade kept his tone as casual as he could. “Come on, let’s go. Goose is waiting for us.” Carefully, he began to walk, leaning most of his weight against his companion as the injury in his stomach throbbed. “There we are.”

He wasn’t entirely sure why he was even bothering to keep his voice cheerful. Beneath the lighthearted demeanor, he was *mad*, and not in the fun way. He was *furious*.

Sapnap half-carried, half-dragged the heavy mercenary out of the great, ugly, yellow, redstone machine that Wade had summoned on his communicator.

It was clear that the self-inflicted wound was still hurting Deadpool- he winced, pressing a hand to his stomach as his feet touched the road and he was forced to stand up straight. But he nodded a moment later, signalling that he was at least recovered enough to walk on his own now. Sapnap gave him a nod of acknowledgment, and stepped a little closer to his side, just in case he lost his balance again.

Goose, the engineer who had operated the machine, had acted as though Wade’s theoretically deadly injury was an entirely commonplace event. After giving them a casual warning about keeping blood off the material of the seats, he had gone right back to telling them both about his girlfriend. Sapnap had been too distracted by the bizarre sensation of hurtling along at three times the speed of a minecart to pay him any proper attention, but he had gathered that Goose’s cousin Bandu was in the hospital for reasons that he couldn’t quite make out, though Gita was still refusing to go back to him.

He had also offhandedly mentioned the chaos in the city center. According to him, the attack had not been the result of a terrorist strike- no, apparently the source had been an alien invasion, which was something that simply happened here from time to time. Sapnap had shot Wade an uneasy glance- the first thing that they had done, at the start of the panic, had been to establish that Dream was not the source of the explosions. Beyond that, Deadpool had announced that, in this particular instance, this was something better left to the military, and that had been the end of it. But *aliens* ... that was a different story altogether.

It was not a story that Goose had thought much of, however, a moment later he was back to lamenting over Gita’s cruel rejections.

The “cab”, as Wade had called it, had dropped them at the end of the road now stricken by the wreckage caused by the fire. Sapnap stared out at the rubble as Goose drove away, taking in the soot drifting through the air like snow, the charred debris littering the street, and the smaller fires that still burned here and there. Fortunately, the damage seemed to be concentrated around one building; though that particular warehouse was now nothing more than a patch of cracked, blackened concrete, surrounded by twisted, skeletal metal foundation rods, the others seemed to be relatively unscathed. The stone and brick of the walls had contained most of the flame and restrained them as they tried to spread out into the city.

“So,” Deadpool said, walking stiffly to Sapnap’s side. “Aliens, huh?”

“It’s not him.” Sapnap’s reply was firm, but he didn’t look around at the mercenary. His gaze was fixed on the fire damage, tracking the lines of ash and dust. If there was one thing in this world that he truly understood, it was fire- how to wield it, how to tame it, and, most importantly, how to read it. And this inferno... this was something else entirely.

“Sure,” Wade continued, unbothered, “It’s not Dream. But that doesn’t mean that whoever it is hasn’t come from- wherever you came from.”

Sapnap hummed in response, totally fixated on tracing the path of the flames.

Everything seemed to have happened in an instant. Far from following the natural burn patterns- epicenter to edge- a huge eruption of fire had etched an immense, almost perfect circle into the ground. Charcoal and soot marked the very fringes of the flames, tracing out the edges of a complete ring of destruction.

It was actually rather impressive. He doubted that even he himself would have been able to create this much flame, this quickly- the level of energy required was beyond him, beyond anyone or anything he knew. If this was indeed Dream’s work...

He could feel himself tensing up as he began to move closer. Whatever had done this was *dangerous*, and for all he knew, it was still here. Cautiously, he stepped forwards, trying to get a glimpse of the epicenter of the fire, before he hesitated. The mercenary, the Angel of Death, had not budged. Instead, he was looking to their left, a slight frown on his face.

“Wade?”

Sapnap glanced around uneasily, trying to make out what Deadpool was staring at. “What are-”

“ *Sapnap* ?”

A familiar voice echoed faintly through the air, and Sapnap almost- *almost* - flinched. He whirled around, eyes wide, searching in vain for the source of the voice, that *impossible* voice.

“Is that you?” The voice continued faintly. “What are you doing here?”

Sapnap felt his fingertips begin to glow with heat, crackling with little sparks as he stared around. “You- you *can't* -” He broke off, gritting his teeth, ready to intercept any attack. “Where are you, Wilbur? Come out!”

The voice had sounded so close, but there was nothing there, he was sure of it...

“I’m here,” Wilbur said, softly. And finally, out of the corner of his eye, Sapnap could see him.

He was standing at the edge of the road, just behind a chunk of smoldering rubble, so pale and translucent that he was barely visible. Sapnap narrowed his eyes, focusing on the blurred form, and he could see the vague shape beginning to solidify beneath his gaze, becoming more real, more *there*. Only...

The figure looked nothing like the way Sapnap remembered him. Where was the uniform, the proud, drawn-up stance, the cocky, confident smile? Where was the arrogant voice, the sharp eyes, the fierce, unwavering demeanor?

The ghost before him wore a soft, threadbare yellow sweater and a gentle, anxious smile. His head was tilted uncertainly, shoulders slumped forwards, hands fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. And his face... his face was marred with some strange, viscous blue substance, leaking from his eyes in little rivulets like tears, dripping slowly from his nose. It soaked the front of his chest, too; blue blood spreading endlessly from a wound that would never heal.

Sapnap stared at him. "Wilbur..." He paused as the ghost *flinched*, shying away from something that he couldn't see. "I'd heard that you- you'd come back. Never thought it was actually true, though." He shook his head. "What are you doing here?"

"I- I'm not Wilbur," The ghost whispered, his voice high and strained. He had wrapped his arms around himself, tucking his head defensively against his chest.

"Right, sure," Sapnap glanced at Deadpool, unsure of the mercenary's reaction to the odd turn of events. "But seriously, Wilbur, what are you-"

He cut himself off with a quiet gasp as the temperature suddenly plummeted. His ears popped as the pressure dropped, and he spun back to stare at the phantom of his old enemy. His breath blossomed into a fine mist before him in the freezing air, but he could still see the outline of the ghost through the blurred cloud.

"I am not-" The ghost said, slowly, his wavering voice trembling with a sudden fury. His face was contorted with anger, twisted to inhuman proportions, and blue began to trickle from the corner of his mouth as he snarled, "*I AM NOT HIM!*"

The shout blasted through the air, extinguishing the few remaining fires in a rush of icy wind, leaving trails of smoke twining pathetically into the air. Around them, the last windows that had survived the inferno shattered into bursts of glimmering shards, which cascaded to the ground in a cacophony of smashed glass.

Sapnap couldn't stop himself as he stumbled backward. What was happening? From all accounts, this ghost was supposed to be harmless- a pathetic, friendly shadow of a former revolutionary, roaming the server, annoying everyone around him as he tried to "atone". Whatever that meant.

This outburst had caught him entirely off guard; the phantom before him seemed to have arisen straight from some vengeful, unearthly nightmare.

“Okay! Alright, calm down!” To Sapnap’s surprise, Wade was the one to intervene, throwing up his hands placatingly. “Who are you, then? What should we call you?”

“I-” The ghost hesitated, looking suddenly unsure, and the icy wind around them died away. Sapnap breathed a quiet sigh of relief as the air around them began to warm once again. “I’m the one who wanted to live,” He continued, softly. “I’m Ghostbur.”

Wade raised his eyebrows. “Okay, Ghost-bur.” He didn’t bother hiding his laughter. “You also here for Theseus? Do you have any idea where he is?”

For a moment, the ghost stared at them, confusion in his eyes. And then, a moment later, his vision cleared, and blue began to pour from his eyes in earnest. “ *Tommy* .” He lowered his head, shoulders hunched protectively. “Tommy’s burning.”

And with that, he lurched forwards, fading in and out of view as he made his way towards the center of the charred circle. He stumbled as he walked, leaving blue-stained footprints in his wake.

Sapnap and Wade shared a glance, and then hurried after him.

It took them a moment to reach the outskirts of the gutted warehouse. The closer they got, the more damage Sapnap could see - the iron rods that had buckled with heat, the stone foundation that had been left half-melted. Fear was beginning to rise in his throat like bile- there was nothing, he knew, that could have survived a blaze like that.

A crater had formed, right at the epicenter of the inferno, sunk down into the concrete foundations, and Ghostbur approached it without hesitation. Feeling slightly nauseous, Sapnap followed, and his breath caught in his throat.

There, curled into a tiny ball at the bottom of the hole, a figure lay still. Sappnap knew exactly who it was, even before he could make out the distinctive, tattered red and white shirt beneath a blanket of ash and soot.

His stomach lurched. “Oh, *Prime* .”

Tommy lay unmoving, wrapped tightly around himself, head buried in his arms. He looked tiny like this- so, so far from the loud, gangly teenager that had fought so hard to keep his ridiculous scrap of territory. Here, now, he looked small, defeated, and utterly, painfully alone. And he *wasn't moving*.

Sappnap's chest felt constricted. The question was pressing against the corners of his mind, but his throat felt too tight to speak. He was *afraid* - frightened to ask, terrified to find out. Sure, Tommy had been annoying- an infuriating thorn in all of their sides, demanding and obnoxious and stubborn, but-

He wasn't evil. Nothing that he did had ever been deliberately cruel, or hurtful just for the sake of it. He could be fun, and kind, and Sappnap knew that he had been loyal to the bitter end, even if that loyalty had been to the enemy. He- he hadn't deserved this. He hadn't deserved any of it.

“Are- are we too late?”

The question came out as a whisper, and he felt his stomach twist. Because if they were, if they had been too slow... if Dream had been the one to murder Tommy in cold blood-

But beside him, Deadpool was shaking his head. “No,” He said, simply. “Kid's alive.”

And- yes. He was right. Sappnap could see it; the uneven rise and fall of Tommy's back, the faint hitching of his shoulders.

He was crying.

Before them, with a faint gasp of pain, Ghostbur vanished from sight. A moment later, he reappeared, kneeling in the rubble beside the stricken teenager. Blue pooled around him, dripping to the ground and evaporating into a faint mist, fading away from his face.

Sapnap made to follow, his hands shaking, but hesitated as Wade caught his shoulder to hold him back. The Angel of Death didn't look at him but watched the scene before them unwaveringly, his expression unreadable.

"Hey, Toms." The ghost murmured, as cheerfully as if he could see nothing but Tommy before him, as though the smoke and rubble did not exist. "Are you alright?"

He looked more solid- more *alive* - than ever, Sapnap thought- the blue disappearing from his cheeks, his eyes bright with feeling.

Slowly, stiffly, Tommy raised his head. His face was frighteningly pale, his eyes red-rimmed, lips dry and cracked. "Ghostbur?" He whispered, and his voice was weak and croaky- from the smoke, or from screaming, Sapnap couldn't tell.

"What- what the *fuck* are you doing here?"

It took Tommy a moment to turn around, struggling to move limbs that must ache with every motion. Teeth gritted with strain, he made to stand up, his hands trembling with the effort. Ghostbur's eyes widened, and he reached out to help but pulled back a second before his arms could phase right through Tommy's shaking form.

"I- I came to help!" He said, instead, with an encouraging smile. "Kristin sent me!"

If Sapnap closed his eyes, he thought, he could almost imagine the scene in a different light: a joyful reunion between long-lost brothers, finally finding their way home. Not- not this complicated, painful mess.

Face twisted with strain, Tommy rose to his knees. His tear-streaked face was flickering between emotions: exhaustion, fear, rage, relief, hatred, and deep, soul-wrenching *grief*, stark enough to make Sapnap's chest ache. "Help?" He asked, quietly, and then his voice darkened with anger. "*Help?* How can you possibly help me? You're dead."

His breathing hitched as his shoulders began to shake, and the gentle flow of tears gave way to uncontrolled, trembling sobs. "You're *dead*, Wil!" His voice broke with the force of his shout, and he slammed a fist uselessly against the ground.

Ghostbur flinched back, his expression crumpling with sorrow. "I- I'm *sorry* ..." He whispered, blue beginning to trickle from his eyes once again. The gash in his chest seemed to grow wider.

"You're *sorry*," Tommy spat and broke into a hacking cough. "Bit- bit late for *that*, innit?"

"You know- you know that if it was my choice, I'd still be alive," Ghostbur said, his voice echoing and distorted. "I'd be here, *really* here."

"Yeah." Tommy pressed his hands against his eyes, leaving smudges of soot on his cheeks. He sounded utterly exhausted. "I'm... It's just--"

"I know." Without warning, the image of Ghostbur shimmered, flickering rapidly. One moment, he was dressed once again in his old L'Manberg uniform, tricorn hat on his head, golden buttons gleaming proudly. The next, he wore his battered coat, the grey cowl draped lopsidedly over his shoulders. And then he was back, his yellow sweater soaked with blue.

Sapnap blinked, startled, but Tommy didn't even react. He wasn't sure that the kid had even noticed.

"I miss him," Tommy whispered through choking cries, face still buried in his hands. "I want my big brother back!"

“I know,” The ghost repeated, and then vanished completely, evaporating like morning dew in the heat of a rising sun.

Tommy knelt alone in the ruins, tears dripping into the ash that covered the ground.

“Well, I’d say it was nice knowing you, Sapnap,” Deadpool exclaimed cheerfully, “But I don’t really like lying, so...”

With one fluid movement, he swung around, away from where Sapnap stood, ignoring his body’s loud protest as the motion pulled at his still-healing stomach muscles. “My work here is done. Hope I won’t be seeing you around!”

“What? What are you talking about?” Sapnap stared at him, looking slightly panicked. “You’re leaving? But what about Dream?”

“Not my problem.” Deadpool didn’t glance back as he started walking away. But he hadn’t taken more than a few steps before Sapnap seized his arm.

“What’s going on? Aren’t you going to fight Dream with us?” His expression had softened to bewilderment, as though he couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing.

“Look-” Wade paused, and sighed in frustration. “I’m not part of your little crusade. I never was. You’re not even paying me!” There was some relief in raising his voice, he found: finally releasing some of the anger that had been building up inside him. “I’m not from your world, and I’m not here to fight Dream. I’m here to find Theseus, and the only reason I’m even doing that is ‘cause that damned goddess of yours won’t leave me *alone*! And guess what?” He took a step forwards, aware that he was now towering threateningly above Sapnap, and rather enjoying the effect. “She didn’t shut up, even after I agreed to help her.

And *then*, she had the sheer *audacity* to try and take control!” For a moment, he paused, realizing that he was running out of breath.

Sapnap took a cautious step back, clearly nervous to aggravate Deadpool further. He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, the mercenary continued, “So, yeah. I’m leaving. I did what she wanted. Theseus is safe, and he’s right there. I’m done.”

“But- hang on.” Raising his head, Sapnap seemed to steel himself. “That’s not everything. You weren’t just meant to find him, you were meant to protect him. And while he’s here, he’s in danger. Where are you gonna take him? Back to Al’s?”

“I-” Wade hesitated. Damnit. He hadn’t thought this far ahead. Hastily, he cast his mind around, searching for a solution, and then- “Nah. I’m not some kind of babysitter. I’m taking him to Daredevil, he’s just the guy for this kind of thing.”

“No.”

Wade frowned, and turned around, looking for the source of the soft, croaky, voice.

“No, you’re not.”

His eyes widened as he took in the sight.

There, standing barely a few feet away from him stood the kid. Theseus was on his feet, his eyes dark with rage, and-

And a pair of *wings*, burnished scarlet wings, flared out behind him.

Beside him, Wade could hear Sapnap catch his breath. Apparently, wings weren’t all that common in his world, either. Where had they even come from? He was certain that they hadn’t been there a minute ago.

“I’m not going with you,” Theseus said, his expression fierce and set. “I’ll need your compass, though, Sapnap.”

“Compass?” Deadpool frowned, certain that he had misheard.

“You know what I’m talking about.” The kid was staring unflinchingly at Sapnap. “Your hunter’s compass. Hand it over.”

“What? No! I’m not going to just *give* you-” Sapnap looked indignant.

“This isn’t a game, Sapnap!” Without warning, Theseus was shouting. “It’s targeting Dream, and I need it. Give it to me! I’m gonna make him *pay* !” His voice was vicious, laced with bitter hatred. “He’s not getting away with it. Not this time. I’ll finish him off- I should have done it back at the vault!”

The kid’s eyes were bright and fevered. It was a look that Deadpool knew all too well; that desperate, self-destructive gaze of unbridled fury.

“Tommy-” Sapnap stared at him, his face a portrait of frustration and pity. “The hunter’s compasses- they don’t work. Not in this world.”

“What?”

“If they worked, we’d have found Dream already, a hundred times over!” Sapnap shook his head. “They just spin in circles. Sam said he’d try to fix them, but...”

“What are you good for then?” Theseus hissed, face pale with rage. He turned away, fists clenched, and began sprinting down the road as those great wings spread out behind him. A moment later, they were beating back and forth, raising clouds of soot and ash, and he soared up into the air.

“Tommy!” Eyes wide, Sarnap dashed forwards, already far too late to stop him. He skidded to a halt in the middle of the street, staring up at the rapidly fading figure in the air.

Leave it, Wade thought to himself. Leave it alone. This is none of your business.

But he was already running.

His stomach ached as he sprinted forwards, racing past Sarnap in a blur of dust, following the glow of Theseus’s wings as he ran through the empty streets. They were huge and bright; easy to track in the dim twilight. To his mild surprise, though, they seemed oddly out of focus- incorporeal, almost ghostly. Deadpool frowned as he ran, trying to make them out more clearly, but before he could, they vanished entirely.

His heart lurched and he almost stumbled, trying to see where the kid had gone, half-certain that, even now, he was plummeting towards the pavement below, but- no. Wade could see him, now, alighted at the very edge of a rooftop, staring out at the lights of the city.

It took him less than a minute to race up the stairs of the fire escape. Blood was pounding in his ears by the time he reached the top, an echoing thunder in his mind, but it faded as he slowed down. Silence fell as he stepped out onto the rough surface of the roof.

Theseus was sitting a few feet away, legs dangling off the edge. His wings had disappeared and faded back into whatever mysterious material plane they had come from. He was leaning back on his hands, head tilted to one side as if in thought, and when he glanced back toward Deadpool, his eyes were empty of tears.

“Hey, kid.” Slowly, Wade sat down beside him. Theseus didn’t respond, but looked away from him, gazing back out towards the city. His wings were reforming, slowly and gradually- perhaps he couldn’t fly with them for long before they faded?

Oh, god. What the hell was he supposed to do now? He was a killer, a mercenary- how on earth was he meant to deal with traumatized teenagers? Awkwardly, he cleared his throat,

feeling wildly out of his depth, but before he could say a word-

“Don’t.”

Theseus was still refusing to look at him, but there was no doubt about who he was talking to. “Don’t try to stop me. There’s no point.”

Ok. Right. He could work with this, couldn’t he?

“What’s the plan, then?” Wade asked, as gently as he could. “You’re just going to go in and kill Dream?”

“Kingpin first,” Theseus replied, bitterly, beating his wings slowly back and forth. “Then Dream, yeah.”

“What’s your plan, though?”

“I- I’ll figure something out.”

“You’ll get yourself killed, more likely,”

“Why do you even care?” Suddenly, the kid was back on his feet, glaring down at him. “Said it yourself, didn’t you? *‘I’m only here because of that damned goddess’? ‘Theseus is safe, I’m done’?* ” He shook his head, staring at Deadpool with disgust. “Well, there you go. You found me. Well done. Now *fuck off*.”

Wade sighed. The worst thing was that the kid was right. What was he doing here? Theseus wasn’t his responsibility. Hell, they weren’t even from the same world! And the kid didn’t want his help! What else was he supposed to do?

His earlier stunt with the sword had been enough to keep the goddess silent for quite a while, and even when she returned, he could say that he had done all that was expected. She'd be breaking the terms of her own agreement if she continued hounding him. Why was he still here, taking on more work that he didn't need?

Gritting his teeth, he rubbed a hand over his face. "Listen, kid. Come with me." He was careful to keep his voice calm. "I'll take you to a friend of mine, one who can really help you. He's a superhero, a good one, and I promise you he'll--"

"I'm not going to Daredevil," Theseus said, bitterly. "I hate him. If I see him, I'm gonna stab him."

"*What ?*" Deadpool stared at him, speechless. He'd never seen anyone react so strongly towards *Daredevil*, of all people. Criminals, perhaps, but... How could anyone else possibly hate the guy? "What did he do?"

"Nothing." Theseus laughed, though there was no humor in it. "That's the problem, innit?"

"Then- we won't go to him. But there are others--"

"Shut up." Without another glance in his direction, Theseus turned away and began walking towards the other side of the rooftop. His wings had spread wide once again, glowing red and gold. "Just- shut up. Leave me alone, you *prick*."

This time, Deadpool didn't try to follow him. There was no way that he'd be able to catch up, not here.

Frustration rose in his chest, even as he tried to shrug it off. That was it. He'd tried! This wasn't his problem anymore!

This wasn't his problem anymore.

He was done.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Hi guys, we're back! This is a long one so enjoy :D

Fair warning, this chapter deals with teams of self-hatred and self-harm so take care!

Pamela Jones had never been one for silence.

Not when she had been forced to escape for the third time, running down a tidy side road with the enraged shouts of her latest foster-mother ringing in her ears. Not when her best friend had looked at her with disgust in his eyes and cursed her for refusing to join him, for betraying him, for choosing a life away from Kingpin and his filthy work. Not when the evacuation sirens had begun to wail out, hailing the destruction to come and lives to be lost.

She had fought her way through it all: shouted her defiance, smiled her reassurances, cried out for help- regardless of whether or not it came. She had talked and sang and laughed, and that was how she had built herself back up, time and time again.

So why now- when she needed her voice, her *strength* , the most- did she feel so quiet?

Ghostlike, she drifted through the city streets. Her footsteps sounded out against the rough tarmac of the pavement, but it was not followed by the usual cheerful greetings and witty remarks. For once, she walked in echoing silence.

She walked alone, with nothing but her memories for company.

The scene was playing in her mind, again and again, crackling with fire and pain. She could still hear Josh's choked gasp of shock as the sword plunged through him, and Tommy's broken screams, and Dream's unhinged laughter and the howling of burning winds, and the final, terrible roar of the flames.

And just like that, they were gone. Her best friend, nervous and gentle and kind, and the boy who had given his life in a futile attempt to save him. The boy who should have been a stranger to her - who had claimed to be from a different world entirely - but who had built them a country and laughed at her jokes and volunteered to carry Em's supplies, despite everything else already weighing him down. Within days, he had managed to break through the carefully maintained defenses of her heart and take up his position as- what? Her trusted right-hand man? The brave, brash little brother that she'd never had?

The bold little brother that she had never had, and now, never would again.

The two most important people in her life were gone, just like that. Vanished in a cloud of smoke and ash.

Her hands were still aching, the skin reddened and blistered from her final, panicked attempts to force her way through the burning window frame. The place had gone up like a torch, fire spreading as though it had been doused in petrol. Hell, for all she knew, it *had* been. Kingpin's last, cruelest act against two more innocent people. Either way, it had been only seconds before the ferocious heat had driven her back from the building. Moments later, the roof had begun to cave, and the walls to split and crack, and she had fallen to her knees as the warehouse crashed in upon itself in a roar of tumbling debris.

Another jab of pain spiked through her heart, and she clenched her fists, ignoring the ache that spread across her skin.

She should go back to the group. Logically, rationally, she knew that it was the necessary thing to do. Though she couldn't quite tell exactly how much time had passed since the fire- four days, perhaps? Five? She knew that she was in trouble. What few coins she had carried were already gone, spent on cheap food that she couldn't remember eating, and she hadn't been able to muster up the energy to find anywhere better to sleep than frigid corners of dirty alleyways. Not that she'd been sleeping much. More like lying on the cold concrete, the smell of the bins thick in her nose and images of the flames flickering in her head.

If she wasn't careful, she wasn't going to last much longer. Not out here. And the group would help her, she knew they would- give her a safe place to rest, any scraps of food that they were able to spare, and willing shoulders to sob onto when it all became too much.

But she wasn't going back. Not now, at least. Not yet.

She wasn't even sure why. Was it the idea of becoming another burden on a group already staggering beneath the weight of their own struggles? Was it because she would have to tell them what happened, to recount the events that played on endlessly in her mind's eye?

Her breath caught in her chest, and she gritted her teeth and kept walking, shoving her hands deep into the pockets of her threadbare coat. Her eyes were narrowed against the cold wind, darting back and forth as she pressed on, searching and searching and searching...

Because that was what she had been doing, almost without pause, for the last two days. Some pointless, tiring quest, and for what? A kind of closure, perhaps. She didn't know, couldn't be bothered to work it out. But for whatever reason, she had carried on, tracing Josh's invisible footsteps. Like a wolf on the scent, she walked the same streets that he must have walked on the night that he had stumbled across Tommy, investigating every nook and cranny, unsure of what she was even looking for.

Josh had mentioned the side road that they had slept in, and it was one that she knew- cozier and safer than most, given that the metal vents set into the brick walls funneled hot air through them whenever their machines were in use. And the bins left at the back of the street could be dragged onto the pavement, as a shield against the prying eyes of pedestrians or the police. She had spent a night there, as soon as she had found it again, curled up beside the warmth of the grille with Josh's beanie clutched tightly in her hands. If she closed her eyes, it was almost possible to imagine him there with her, dozing lightly, the worry lines on his brow fading as he slept.

Josh had been the one to find the road, after all; in the times before Kingpin had "employed" them, before Liam had left them, before the endless strain had driven Josh into the cold embrace of the drugs that they had been forced to sell. The place had been their little hideout for a while, though they had left it immediately at the promise of food, money, and a roof over their heads. If Pam had known, then, what they would cost, she would have chosen the dingy little road in a heartbeat.

Neither of them had gone back. Not until Josh had found Tommy, at least. Everything changed after Daredevil had caught Josh and managed to get them both away from Kingpin's

clutches. After Liam had chosen to believe that they had betrayed him. None of their old haunts were safe, and none of their old contacts could be trusted. It had been dangerous even to keep in contact with each other, not knowing if Liam or his lackeys would try to come after them. The best that they had been able to do was to stick close to the camp at Central Park, trying to alternate their time until nobody would believe that they really knew each other.

And then Josh had finally cracked, and his lawyer- whatever his name had been- had gotten him into rehab, and Pam had lost all contact with him until he had turned up once again at their camp, uncertain and healing, with a scrappy teenager in tow.

She had been so happy to see him. So relieved that he was recovering, was *safe*, and they had fallen back into their old habits within hours. And the worst part was, in the end, that they had been right. Right to stay apart, keep their heads down, avoiding any traces of their old life. Because look at them now.

A sudden spike of fury surged in her heart, and she kicked out at an empty soda can, sending it clattering down the street. *God* . She'd known that leaving would hurt Liam. She'd *tried* to get him to see reason, and come with them. Maybe, just maybe, if she'd tried harder- found the right thing to say, the right words to explain... Perhaps now, they would both be laughing with her and Tommy.

Fuck . She clenched her jaw and moved on, striding faster and faster as her vision began to blur. Around her, the signs of battle grew more and more distinct; the buildings scorched by lightning strikes or punctured with ragged holes, and the road beneath her feet cracked and blistered with heat. The streets were empty, save for the building teams and engineers, and the few SHIELD guards left to try and keep curious citizens from being crushed by the debris from the unstable walls. Pam slipped past them with ease, and kept walking, circling the empty roads, numbly aware of the damage that surrounded her.

In the end, it was pure chance that led her to it.

It stood solidly at the end of a dark alleyway, surrounded by scraps of litter that had spilled from the ruined skips. Tall, imposing, and silent, the portal frame loomed from the shadows, looking almost laughably out of place.

A faint shiver ran down her spine as she stared up at it. Josh had told her that he had found Tommy here, lost and hurt and clearly in trouble. She wished that he had felt safe enough to tell her just how lost Tommy had been, and just how much trouble he was caught up in. Maybe then, she would have been able to protect him, hide him, keep both him and Josh safe from the powers that hunted them...

But it was too late now.

It was all too late.

And in that instant, it all seemed to catch up to her. The pain, the grief, the exhaustion welled up inside her, and she almost stumbled, reaching out to brace herself against a wall before she fell.

She was so tired.

Staring at the indifferent portal frame, Tommy's voice seemed to echo in her mind. All of those wild stories that he had told, the country that he claimed to have built, the brother he had loved and lost. Back then, she had listened and laughed and sympathized, quietly dismissing them as the rambling imaginings of a very bright, very lonely child, adrift on the heartless currents of the world.

Now, she wished that she had paid more attention.

Because now, there was a chance- more than a chance even- that those stories had been true. And that Tommy, ordinary, extraordinary Tommy, was just as unearthly as the portal frame that stood before her now.

Silently, she stepped forwards until she was close enough to the frame to touch it. Slowly, she raised her arm, pressing the palm of her hand against the icy surface of the dark, rigid material.

Tommy had been an offworlder. He had been stolen from his home by a ruthless being who had stopped at nothing to see him dead. And he had died in a squalid warehouse, clutching the body of his only other friend, helpless to react as the flames had erupted.

It was getting harder to breathe, as though a vice was growing tighter and tighter around her chest.

Why had she even come here? What was the point? Whatever she had been looking for, it wasn't here. She doubted that it was anywhere, anymore. It was gone, lost in smoke and ash.

The portal was quiet beneath her touch, still and silent and empty.

Her pulse was thrumming in her fingertips, the blood booming in her ears. Dark spots began to gather in the corners of her vision, and at that moment, she wanted nothing more than to *rage*. To scream and roar and fight, to battle her way into the underworld and drag her friends back from death herself if she had to. She would tear through the heart of the city itself if doing so would deliver them back to her. Perhaps it was selfish. At that moment, she couldn't have cared less. She had lost so much- why the *hell* would she shy away from taking back the people that she loved?

Clenching a fist, she drew back her arm to lash out at the portal, throw a futile punch at the unforgiving stone, knowing and not caring that all she would do was break a knuckle or two. But before she could drive her fist into the rock-

“For Prime’s sake!”

She froze, instantly on the alert, muscles tense and ready.

“My head is killing me!”

The voice was whiny and frustrated, and it was coming from the main road that led up to the alleyway. Pam glanced behind her, looking for the source.

“It shouldn’t be far now,” Another voice responded, deeper and gruffer than the first. “The portal is close, I wrote down the coordinates.”

The portal . Stifling a gasp, Pam ducked behind the portal frame and out of sight. These people, whoever they were, knew about the portal. They were searching for it. And by the sounds of it, neither of them was a SHIELD official.

That left two options. One, they were crackpot conspiracy theorists who had gotten hold of the rumors that SHIELD had been unable to suppress, and were looking for the source of the chaos in the city. Or two- they knew about the portal because they had stepped from it themselves. Just like Tommy. Just like... like the masked man who had murdered her best friends.

“Here!” The second voice sounded triumphant, and much nearer; the two had clearly entered the alleyway. “I told you it was nearby.”

“Well, great,” The other replied, now sounding irritated. “It’s not lit. And Sapnap isn’t here.” Pam could hear his sigh of frustration. “What’s the plan now?”

“If we had a communicator-” The second voice cut itself off, and there was a rustle as whoever this was shook their head. “We can’t contact him. So for now, we’ve just got to try and light this portal back up. If we go back, we can find new comms- we might even be able to get in touch with Phil, or Techno. Prime knows if they’d even be bothered to help, but if we can get them on our side-”

Trusting to the darkness of the alley, Pam risked a glance around the corner. The two stood before the portal, silhouetted against the light spilling from the end of the street, frowning up at the towering frame.

“Wait, hang on-” The first guy said, cutting off his companion. “What do you mean, *if* we had a communicator? I have mine.”

He looked- well, he looked ordinary, Pam thought. Short, skinny, and pale-skinned, with brown hair and dark, white-rimmed sunglasses. She could have passed him on the street and thought nothing of him. The second one, however...

“George.” His companion was staring at him, his tone a mixture of bewilderment and utter frustration. “You *have* - why didn’t you-” He closed his eyes. “How did you manage to keep it? You were unconscious! They took everything you had on you!”

Before he could finish, Pam ducked back out of sight, her heart racing. *What in the world ...*

The second guy was very clearly not human. He was huge- tall and broad, and *four-armed* . His skin was deep green, though most of it was hidden beneath the set of hulking, purple-sheened armor that he wore and the lower half of his face was covered by some kind of mask. In one hand, he carried a trident- huge, glimmering blue, clearly razor-sharp. What kind of world had Tommy come from?

“I wasn’t carrying it on me!” The first guy- George?- exclaimed, as if it were obvious. “It was in my inventory.”

Pam stood there, confused, angry, and- scared. Very scared. But whoever these people were, they were clearly involved in whatever had happened to Tommy. She had to know more. Cautiously, she leaned forwards, peering back around the edge of the frame.

“What if someone tried to contact you?” The big guy sounded incredulous, staring at George in shock. Fortunately, neither of them was looking in her direction.

“Well, sounds like a them problem, doesn’t it?” George shrugged nonchalantly and pulled something from what seemed like thin air. Pam squinted, trying to make out what it was- it looked small and flat, almost like a cellphone.

“For the love of Prime- give me that!” The giant was scowling now, and he snatched the device away from his companion. His eyes widened as he stared down at it, reading whatever was written on the surface. “Sapnap’s been trying to get in contact with us. For *days*, now!” Briefly, he glanced up from the screen and glowered at George. “He probably thinks we’re

dead or something!” Rapidly, he began typing, his fingers a blur on the screen. “Right. I’ve sent him our coordinates.”

“Has he said anything about what he’s been up to?” Though George still sounded far too casual, Pam suspected that there was a trace of regret in his tone.

“Yeah, he-” The giant blinked as he stared at the device, then did a double-take. “He found Tommy!”

He found Tommy .

Shock slashed through Pam’s chest, as though she had been doused in icy water. When had those messages been sent? Before, or after- Had this Sapnap meant that he had found- found what was... left? Or- no, he couldn’t have found Tommy before- they had been together, or with Josh, and Josh hadn’t mentioned-

Or maybe, just maybe, she had been wrong. She could have been wrong. Dear god, *please* , she might have been wrong. She strained to see what was written on that little screen, to hear every word that was being said-

“Something happened- there was a fire? But- but he’s alive, he seemed alright-” Excitement was rising in the giant’s voice as he scanned the messages. “And he said-”

Just like that, the excitement vanished. Surprise, then dread, flashed across his face, and he continued, “He said he’s going to try to kill Dream.”

“But- that’s a good thing, right?” George asked, sounding bewildered. “He’s gonna help us!”

“No, it’s *not* , George!” The giant shouted, sounding suddenly furious. “Dream *wants* this world! He wants to control it, just like the SMP, but he needs Tommy to do it! We have to keep Dream *away* from him, at all costs!”

Pam's heart was racing as rapidly as her thoughts. It was difficult to think straight, to rationalize- everything was being swept away in a torrent of fury and grief and- more dangerous than either- *hope* . Because if what she had just heard was true-

There would be no stopping her.

She clenched her fists and stepped forwards into the light.

George glanced around, and flinched backward, evidently not expecting her sudden appearance. The giant spun around to face her, eyes blazing, and leveled his shimmering trident at her throat. "Who are you?"

Pam didn't shy away from the shining blades. She set her jaw, stared the giant straight in the eyes, and asked, "Tommy is alive?"

The city stood in ruins. Again.

Daredevil surveyed the damage as he finished his last rounds of the night. In complete fairness, the destruction was actually far less than he had first feared: though it was severe, it was mostly limited to the few blocks that surrounded the portal. And there were very few casualties, too, given the speed of SHIELD's civilian evacuation.

Already, he could tell that the city was beginning to stir back to life, as the people started out on the long, familiar road to recovery. He could hear them all, crawling out of the bunkers, calling out greetings to acquaintances, and returning to their homes. If they still had one to go back to.

Unfortunately, as the rest of the city hauled itself back to some semblance of normality, its shadier underside was doing the same. Crime was returning to the streets of Hell's Kitchen in force; in fact, Daredevil couldn't help but wonder if it had ever truly left. Already, there had been an attempt at a major bank robbery- a desperate group hoping to hit it big in the chaos. Daredevil had caught them, though. That was, after all, what he always did.

What he did not usually do, however, was interrogate damn near everyone he caught- as well as the police who came to arrest them- searching for any trace of the elusive Theseus.

Matt hadn't seen Deadpool since the incident at the portal, but could only assume that he was also on the hunt, driven by the goddess that he had claimed was invading his mind. Karen, too, had thrown herself into finding the boy; visiting the homeless shelters with his description and scouring the missing person reports. Yet despite all their efforts, Theseus was still missing.

And Matt had a nasty feeling that Theseus' enemies hadn't stopped searching for him, either. For the last two days, maybe three, he had been picking up rumors. Tiny traces, scraps of overheard whispers, and fragments of panicked words as he broke into another dingy criminal hideout. Little twisted suggestions that there was money to be gained and respect to be earned- and that the prize was, even now, sitting somewhere in the city, scared and vulnerable and alone.

He prayed that the rumors were just that- rumors. He prayed that what he was hearing was nonsense, just little scraps of random information that he was piecing into a story much bigger and more dangerous than reality. Because if- if he wasn't wrong- then Theseus' foe had made a new alliance, and an alliance with Kingpin was a powerful and volatile thing.

Either way, he couldn't prove that it was indeed true- and he had no way, yet, to respond if Kingpin *was* dealing with an offworlder. For now, he had to keep looking for the child, however futile the search was proving.

Where else could he go? He had no way to reach Sam, now that SHIELD had given him direct orders to stay out of the situation. Fury, of course, hadn't contacted him since. And Deadpool and the other offworlder, the fire mutant, were still silent.

A new group of offworlders had joined the fight, too. He had arrived just in time to hear them flee the scene, and had chased them all the way to the docks before being forced to retreat. Though he had considered reaching out to them, he was wary- the first thing that they had done, after all, was spark a new battle in the middle of his city. He had no way of knowing if they were here for Theseus and if they were, whether their intentions were malicious.

He couldn't restrain a sigh of abject frustration. The situation was a mess. It was a great tangled knot of humans and offworlders and clashing wills, and if they weren't careful, they would lose control entirely. The whole city was sitting on a ticking time bomb, and the fuse was a lost, sixteen-year-old boy.

A sudden scream echoed from somewhere below him, and he jolted back to awareness. Before he could regather his thoughts, he was moving, leaping toward the ground with fluid, practiced ease.

The scream had sounded vaguely familiar, but it was only as he drew near that he managed to place it.

Daril was a small-time thug, just another of the many low-ranked criminals in Kingpin's entourage. It was no surprise to find him here, lurking in the back alleys, on the hunt for an unsuspecting victim carrying an expensive bag or purse. What was surprising was the fact that, far from being in his usual position- holding a knife to someone's throat as he searched their pockets for a wallet- he was struggling weakly, pinned against the rough bricks and calling out desperately.

"Help! *Help me!* I'm- I'm a law-abiding citizen, and this, this *villain* is assaulting me!"

He was doing a very good imitation of the classic damsel in distress, Matt thought, as he dropped to the ground a few feet away. Daredevil had caught him plenty of times for various crimes, and with each fresh capture, Daril had repented loudly and sworn that he would change his ways. And, like clockwork, had been back out on the streets within a week, raiding tills and breaking into cars.

But Matt didn't recognize the "villain" currently holding him by the front of the shirt.

They were tall, certainly, but lean- almost scrawny. Though their face was covered by something that muffled their breathing, a mask or a bandanna, perhaps, they sounded young and slightly out of breath. That wasn't surprising: whoever they were, they had just overpowered a man who must be twice their weight. Their heart was pounding, and their body temperature raised- was that just exertion from the fight, or was something else going on? Were they ill?

"Daredevil!" Daril began to flail against his aggressor's grip, twisting and struggling. "You said you'd protect me! I'm a part of the flock an' all, I've been good, I swear! Save me!"

Quietly, Matt cleared his throat.

The person before him- villain, or a new vigilante?- froze at the sudden sound. Matt could sense their eyes flicking toward him, looking him up and down. To his surprise, they *growled* at the sight of him- very faint, clearly not intended to be heard at all, but filled with distaste- even hatred. The voice had sounded human, and possibly male, though he couldn't know for certain. Either way, he did not release Daril but hoisted him slightly higher.

"What did he do?"

Perhaps he was jumping to conclusions, but Matt knew Daril too well to assume his innocence. The chances that this young man had attacked him in self-defense- or in defense of another- were high. Still, though, he wouldn't let the situation get out of hand, however much Daril deserved a taste of his own medicine.

The vigilante, however, remained silent. He stood still, holding Daril trapped, his eyes fixed on Matt. The cold, unblinking stare was beginning to grow unnerving.

What did he want? Matt had never met this person before in his life, he was sure of it. Why was this newcomer gazing at him with so much dislike, as though Matt had somehow betrayed him?

And his pulse wasn't just fast, he thought, suddenly- it was *racing*, growing quicker by the moment. His body temperature, too, was rising, from fever-heat to something much more

dangerous. He couldn't possibly still be standing, let alone *fighting* , with whatever illness was causing this. Perhaps he wasn't sick, then- could he have some kind of mutant ability?

Cautiously, Matt took a step nearer, concern rising in his chest. "Are you alright?"

There was a quiet intake of breath, and a shuffle of movement as the young vigilante leaned away from him. And then-

"No."

His voice was icy and controlled, like a frozen waterfall, moments away from splitting into a rush of razor-sharp shards. "No, I'm very much *not* ."

Oh. Oh, no.

Matt felt his heart plummet.

He couldn't see the man's face, but he didn't need to. The devastation in his voice told him more than enough.

There was more to this story than met the eye, that much was obvious. This was no reckless youngster with more foolhardy courage than sense. Whoever this man was, he was utterly distraught- and *burning* with rage. A very, very dangerous combination- for both the man himself and everyone who stood in his way.

Matt realized, suddenly, that he was treading a slender line. One wrong move here, and he could be fighting for his life, or abandoning a grief-stricken young man to the mercy of the cold-hearted authorities.

"Is there any way I could help you?" He asked, cautiously. Slowly, he took a step forward, keeping his stance open; a quiet display of trust, of reassurance.

“Actually,” The vigilante replied softly- his voice dark with something that was growing frighteningly close to *hatred* - “You can.”

Without warning, Matt heard the scuffle of Daril dropping to the ground. The criminal took no chances, scrambling for the safety of the other end of the alleyway. Matt frowned, wondering what had prompted his sudden release, when he sensed movement directly in front of him, and- before he had a chance to react- felt a blinding pain explode across his face.

He cried out in shock and stumbled backward, immediately back on his guard, arms raised defensively.

The young vigilante had punched him.

He'd *punched* him.

Why on Earth had he done that?

It took a heartbeat for the ringing to clear from Matt's ears, and he was able to regain his balance. The man hadn't moved to follow him, but his pulse was racing as though he had just run a marathon, and his breathing was fast and shallow.

Matt hesitated, unwilling to trigger a full-blown fight. What the hell was going on? Perhaps he'd made a terrible misjudgment of the whole situation. His nose was throbbing, and he could feel his left cheekbone beginning to ache alongside it.

He tilted his head in sheer disbelief as he listened to the vigilante's rapid breaths. “But- *why*?” The question sounded almost ridiculous, as though the answer should be obvious, only- it wasn't. Matt had absolutely no idea what this stranger had against him.

There was a pause, and then a hiss of fury. “Go *fuck* yourself, that's why!”

The veneer of icy calm had shattered completely. The man sounded very different without it; no longer controlled and cold, but fiercer, wilder, and even younger than he had first appeared to be.

A tiny corner of Matt's heart seemed to break a little at the fractured taunt. Something had happened to this person, something that nobody should have to go through, something that had left him like this; angry and desperate, hunting criminals twice his size. And somehow, whatever had happened was connected to him, Matt. He was clueless as to what, or why- but somehow, he was involved in this.

But before he could say a word, there was an odd- *shifting* in the space just behind the stranger. It was as though something was materializing, being tugged rapidly into existence from nowhere. The sound of rustling and the faint scent of smoke filled the air, and Matt realized what was happening less than a second later.

Wings. The vigilante had grown- or summoned, or who knew what- a pair of large, feathery *wings* , sprouting straight from his shoulder blades. They were rippling with warmth, and what was most likely *light* , setting the plain brick walls awash with their glow.

There was a rush of air as they spread wide, and in a flurry of movement, the young man was aloft. Two strong beats of those beautiful wings carried him high, up and up, and he swept through the air in a graceful arc.

Fortunately, he didn't go far- not for now, at least. Gently, he alighted on the rooftop above, evidently under the impression that he had escaped Daredevil's response.

But Matt was already on the move. These weren't just any old buildings surrounding them; they were *his* , his territory. He knew every inch of them, every nook and cranny, and- while he may be slower to take to the air- these were *his* rooftops, and he could navigate them blind.

He had caught up within moments, even as the young vigilante began to run once again, fleeing across the skyline. His wings were trembling slightly, flickering oddly in and out of existence, great patches of feathers simply disappearing from reality and reforming once

again. It was clear that their initial burst of strength was fading fast; it might not be long before they vanished entirely.

Still, they had enough substance to boost the vigilante over gaps that should have been impossibly wide, leaving Matt struggling to keep pace as they sprinted over the concrete and tiles.

The man wasn't getting away, though. Not yet, at least.

"What the *fuck* ?" Evidently, the stranger hadn't expected Daredevil to follow him. "Get away from me, you creep!"

Matt's eyebrows rose beneath his mask. Who *was* this man, with his glowing wings and burning rage and shocked indignance that Daredevil was still chasing him?

The vigilante's voice pitched as he spotted Matt, still racing behind him. " *Hey* ! Stop- you- you know I'm a minor?"

What ?

For a split second, Matt faltered. A minor?

Not just a young man. A *teenager* , a winged teenager- who sounded as though he'd been through a *war* . Lost and alone and scared and *angry* .

Oh, *hell* .

The edge of the row of rooftops was coming up fast. They'd be forced to stop there, with nowhere else to leap- and no way down unless they backtracked to a fire escape several buildings behind them. Hopefully, they would have a chance to communicate properly then.

For now, though, he had to keep the vigilante's attention: stop him from spotting any other roofs and making a break for it.

"What are you doing out here, then?" He called, hoping that the guy would be able to hear him over the rush of wings. "You're fast, but that's not going to be much help if Kingpin pins a target to your back. Let me help you!"

The vigilante snorted derisively. "As if I'm going anywhere with *you* ." He glanced over his shoulder, evidently scrambling for something else to say, anything to get Matt off his tail. "You know, Phil warned me about people like you!" Slightly breathless from the sprint, but shouting nonetheless. "Said not to trust your kind no matter how many compliments and gifts you gave me, 'cause, at the end of the day, he told me, you'd just break my heart!"

"Wh- *What* ?"

Utterly thrown, Matt almost stumbled again- he'd taken some serious mental damage from that one. And then the edge of the rooftop was upon them, and he froze, poised on the brink, waiting for the kid to pause.

Only-

With a crow of triumph, the young vigilante didn't hesitate. His wings flared with warmth, and then he was leaping forwards into thin air. Matt couldn't restrain a gasp of shock, and lunged to catch him, stop him plummeting wildly towards the unforgiving concrete below-

But there was no need. He heard the rush of air as the kid's wings spread out and swept him down towards the streets in a smooth glide. Another flap of wingbeats, and he was gone, lost to the roads below.

Matt stood on the edge of the roof, listening after him, powerless to follow him now as the flapping of wings faded away.

Breathing hard, Tommy tumbled in through the open window.

Well, not quite *open* - the glass had been smashed a while ago, and the frame was beginning to splinter away from the brick wall that it was set into. At least there were no more shards clinging to the edges; he had made sure of that when he'd first moved in.

In the end, finding a new home had been easy. After the Wither attack, dozens of apartment blocks had been abandoned, their owners fleeing to safer ground. And while most of them now lay in ruins, or had been left rent apart and crumbling, a few had survived the bombardment. All he had needed to do was pick one that didn't seem to be in immediate danger of toppling, and claim it for his own.

It wasn't as though he would be staying for long, anyway.

The old owners of the flat, whoever they were, had clearly left in a hurry; too busy running from that Wither to bother about packing properly. It had taken Tommy only hours to scavenge everything that he needed, hauling it up to one of the bedrooms and stashing it in a cupboard. His only real problem was water: the attack had probably ruined the redstone mechanisms that brought it up to the sinks, and he couldn't find any concealed infinite water sources. Fortunately, he'd discovered a crate of bottled water in one of the chests, along with several cartons of juice. For now, at least, he'd survive.

Idly, he ran a hand across the wallpaper as he stared back out of the broken window, taking a moment to catch his breath.

A faint rumbling echoed through the streets as part of another building caved in on itself, succumbing to the damage inflicted by the Wither's foul projectiles.

The Wither.

He'd been genuinely surprised to hear just how much chaos the thing had caused- and how much destruction it had been able to wreak before it was killed. A great section of the city had been forced to evacuate as hundreds of homes were reduced to rubble and smoke, and thousands of lives had been upended by the chaos that it had caused. How on earth had the situation gotten so out of hand?

He himself hadn't thought much of it when he'd spotted the footage on one of those strange, film-reeling item frames- Josh had a name for them, he was certain- a week ago. After all, though rogue Withers were rare, they were far from unheard of. It was not uncommon for some foolish or desperate player to summon the monster without making full preparations and then die in an attempt to kill it- or flee for their lives as they realized the extent of their mistake. The Withers tended to go on a rampage, hunting down anything that moved but was generally quickly subdued by the more experienced members of the server.

This, though, was different.

Here, the city had been ravaged, thrown into total chaos. There had been no precautions, no preparations for taking the beast down. In fact, nobody seemed to recognize the monster at all. As if they had never *seen* one before.

It was difficult to believe: how could such an advanced civilization not know what a Wither was? True, this was an- *unusual* server, but surely...

Tommy shook his head to clear it; he was getting off track, losing himself in thought. He seemed to be doing that more and more frequently recently. Either way, if this world truly did not recognize a Wither for what it was, then it was highly unlikely that they were the ones to have summoned it.

Which meant that somebody else was the culprit. Somebody else had brought a Wither here and unleashed it in the middle of the unsuspecting city.

Who the hell could have been crazy enough to attempt it? Dream, of course, would have been his first choice, but- why would he have done it? What did he stand to gain from raising an uproar in the city? Surely all that would have done was make it harder for himself- it isn't easy to find a lost person in a place suddenly full of them, as families were torn apart in the commotion.

But, if not Dream, then who? Nobody just *happens* to have the materials to build the most dangerous weapon in existence in their inventories.

Except maybe Techno . Tommy's tired thoughts were beginning to drift now, away from any practical ideas. His brother would often come home with an armful of dark, ashy skulls, a testament to the hours spent camping in Nether fortresses. Another one of his weird hobbies, just like potato farming, or the occasional leading of anarchist revolutions. *He'd probably be crazy enough. Hell, he might genuinely have just happened to have the sand and skulls in his pockets.*

But Techno wasn't here. Not that he'd have any reason to be. Tommy doubted that Techno would even know that his little brother had left the server- and even if he did, why would he follow? He probably wanted Tommy dead as badly as Dream did.

For some reason, Tommy's throat was beginning to grow painfully tight. He cleared it gruffly and straightened up, turning his back on the shattered view outside. Some food always made him feel a little better, and he didn't look back as he headed toward the kitchen.

Unfortunately, the only thing that he had were those odd, crunchy pieces in shiny packets, just like the ones that he'd seen in the shop that Josh had taken him to. There were other things in the cupboards, but they were sealed away in little iron containers and he hadn't worked out how to open them yet. The crunchy pieces all tasted delicious, but they never filled him up properly, and his stomach always felt queasy after he ate too many at once.

He wondered how everyone else was doing. They must have reached the edge of town a few days ago; the camp would be fully set up by now. With any luck, they would have been able to gather enough fuel to get the campfire going, and Kara would even now be boiling soup or "cofie".

There was the faintest tremor in his fingers as he tore open the scrunchy packet and began to devour the contents.

What time was it? Were they already asleep, or still awake, telling stories and half-hearted jokes as they waited for those with other duties to return? Would Matt be humming quietly to himself, while Mel scribbled endlessly in the little notebook that she never let anyone else see? Would Josh be returning any minute, with a warm meal in his hands and a cheerful song on his tongue, his breath misting in the chilly air?

Without warning, pain flared in his chest. He squeezed his eyes shut, gritting his teeth as the burn began to spread, reaching out across his shoulders and back. The crinkly packet slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor with a pathetic little crunch.

Would Pam's face light up in a smile at the sight of him? Would she shift up on her log to make sure that there was room, beckoning him over, flinging a happy arm across his shoulders as he sat down?

The ache was growing, sending pain shooting down his arms and spine.

And Josh would beam right back as he settled down beside her, right before he turned to ruffle Tommy's hair and pass him a box of warm leftovers that Tina had let him take.

His hands were beginning to tremble, and he clenched them into fists. Already, the air around him was growing warmer, and he knew that his skin was beginning to steam.

And Josh-

The pain *erupted*, and his eyes flew open. Heart pounding, he stared down at his forearms and felt a sick swoop of nausea low in his belly.

Bright, glowing lines traced themselves across his skin, twining themselves through his flesh, as though every drop of blood in his veins was alight. They shifted slowly, from red to white

to shining gold as they *burned*, winding slowly around his wrists.

Josh wasn't coming back. Josh would never be coming back.

And Pam- he hadn't even seen her after- after what had happened. Had she made it out? She must have. She *must* have, must have fled before his fire had exploded, because if she hadn't- if she'd lingered, and gotten caught too close to the blaze-

It was his fault. He'd failed Josh, and he'd failed Pam, and it was *all his fault* .

If Pam was alive- *don't say that don't think like that, she's alive, she is, she has to be* - wherever she was now, she hadn't looked for Tommy. He couldn't blame her. She must hate him, now, and he knew that she was right.

Perhaps, one day, once he had done what little he could to make this right, he could go back. He could find his way back to the group, and back to her, and he could throw himself to his knees and beg for the forgiveness that he would never, ever deserve. It was selfish, impossibly selfish, but- but he had nobody left. He couldn't return to the server. And here, without the last person who had been kind and brave and trusting enough to offer him friendship, he was totally, utterly alone.

But he had to do this, first. He could never repair the damage that had been done. That didn't mean that he would leave the perpetrators unpunished.

Josh's murder would not go unavenged.

And maybe- maybe then- he would be able to look Pam in the eyes again.

Pain spiked beneath his skin, and he sank to his knees, burying his nails into his own flesh. Furious and desperate, he tore at the glowing veins of light with some mad fervor, leaving deep scratches that welled with flickering blood. His whole body was shaking uncontrollably and he slammed a fist into the ground, turning his head to sink his teeth into his skin.

Fire flared in a blaze of heat as his flesh broke open, burning like a ring of candle flame. His heart missed a beat at the sight, and he pressed his other hand over the wound to smother the heat before a stray spark could set light to the thin carpet. The last time this had happened, he had half-destroyed the bedroom that he had been sleeping in before he had been able to quell the flames. He didn't want to waste time searching for a new base; there were more important things to do.

I will find them .

He wasn't sure if he had spoken the words aloud, or merely screamed them silently into the tumult of his mind.

I will find them, and I will kill them.

His mouth tasted like ash and blood.

They are dead.

They had escaped the conflagration at the warehouse. Fine. If fire would not destroy them, then the cold diamond of a well-honed blade would have to do. All he had to do was reach them.

He wasn't sure how long he had been hunting. Five days? A week? It was hard to keep track of the passing time, especially now that he was taking to the streets every night. But, slowly, he was making progress.

It had been difficult to be taken seriously, at first. He looked too young, he supposed- in such a crowded server, they had no need to rely on children to be their diplomats and soldiers. Within a day, he had fashioned Tubbo's old bandanna into a makeshift mask and covered his hair with a ragged red hoodie stolen from an overflowing skip. Concealed behind his tattered disguise, he had sought out a criminal.

His first fight had been almost laughably easy. An hour after his search had begun, he had found a tall young woman in a shop displaying hundreds of small, glossy black rectangles, waving a weapon at the man behind the counter and demanding money. She hadn't noticed him enter until it was too late.

He had beaten her bloody, and it had only taken a few growled threats to get her to tell him about her boss. It was clear, though, that she knew very little. Another goon, just like the men who worked for Liam. Ignoring the shaky thanks of the shop owner, he had left her unconscious on the gleaming floor and disappeared out of the door.

It had taken three days- or was it four?- for the word to spread. A new vigilante on the streets, determined, single-minded, and ruthless. They had even given him a nickname: Red Riot. It was probably based on the stolen hoodie, not that it mattered. A dangerous reputation would help him to no end, though he still despised being compared to Daredevil.

And, speaking of Daredevil, the useless prick just *refused* to leave him alone. Wherever he went, whoever he fought, the other vigilante kept on his heels, slowing him down, going on about right and wrong, or proper justice, and it was beginning to enrage him. He didn't care. *He didn't care*. Right or wrong, what did it matter? How arrogant was Daredevil, to decide that he alone could deal out destruction in the name of *justice* ?

Tommy fought for what he cared about. It was as simple as that. If other people got hurt, then they got hurt. He had fought for the disks, and he had fought for Wilbur, and he had fought for his friends.

And then, after everything, he had let Dream go.

He wasn't going to make the same mistake again.

The fire in his veins was fading, cooling slowly back to blue as the pain receded. Wiping the blood from his arms, he made his way to the sofa, feeling suddenly very tired. It took him a moment to pull Friend's worn fleece from his inventory, and he wrapped it tightly around himself; the cold wind blew in through the shattered window, and it was harder to sleep when he was shivering like a leaf.

The scent of wool filled his nose, and his mind drifted back to Ghostbur. He hadn't returned after Tommy had screamed at him in the ruins of the warehouse, and why would he? He must hate Tommy now, too. Ghostbur had only been trying to help, in his own fragile way, and Tommy had thrown it back in his face. The shimmering ghost may very well have the last person who cared about him, and how had he treated him? Vicious words and pathetic sobs.

Gods.

No wonder Tommy didn't have anybody left.

The sound of his knockback stick colliding with a meaty skull echoed dully in the chill air of the storage room. His arms were still stinging with pain, though he had torn an old tea towel into strips and tied them tightly across the scratches to stop the bleeding, and his fire had effectively killed off any possible infection. The cries of pain were sharp and loud in his ears, and he set his jaw grimly. There was no place for mercy in this game. Not anymore.

Not until Dream was dead.

His target was higher in Kingpin's gang than anyone else he had been hunting- a nasty weapons dealer and smuggler, overseeing operations across half the country. The young woman that he had taken down last night had given him the name, and it hadn't been hard, from there, to find an address.

Unfortunately, the stupid red-suited vigilante had been waiting for him.

"Beating him up will get you nowhere."

Daredevil's voice was calm and quiet, though it startled Tommy enough to drop the half-conscious dealer that he had been punching. Fortunately, he had the presence of mind not to spin around and face his foe defensively; instead, he stood where he was, staring down at his victim. But his mind was racing. How the hell had Daredevil figured out where he was? And why did he *insist* on trying to stop Tommy, to pull him from this violent path?

"There's no point trying to fight an organization like this. Not alone. Not one by one. Eventually, they'll catch up to you, and there are a lot more of them than there are of you. All it takes is for one of them to get lucky, no matter how strong or smart you are."

Frustration was beginning to build in Tommy's veins, thudding dully in his ears. Without sparing Daredevil a glance, he turned towards the door of his victim's ratty apartment, trying to block out the pointless rambling. He couldn't lose focus, not now.

"But," Daredevil continued, evenly. "I have evidence against Kingpin. Lots of it. If you work with me, we can gather enough proof to leave him rotting in prison for the rest of his miserable life."

How easy would Wilbur have found it, were he standing in Tommy's place, to simply walk away? Or, even better, to hurl a clever, silver-tongued retort over his shoulder before striding away into the gloom, his words hanging heavy in the air in the way that only *his* words could? Would he even have noticed the rage now boiling up like acid in Tommy's stomach, or would he have shrugged it off as easily as he did his coat, and moved on with fresh resolve in his heart?

Reckless. Thoughtless. Impulsive.

And right now, very, very angry.

"*Proof*." Barely even aware of it, Tommy was turning on his heel. He strode back towards Daredevil, feeling his face contorting with fury beneath his mask, his voice a low hiss of fury. "*Evidence* . He's guilty. I know it, you know it. *Everyone* knows it." Drawing himself up, almost haughtily, he stared Daredevil down. "All that's left is to kill him."

Without missing a beat, he drove his boot into the ribs of the injured arms dealer. A nasty *crack* sounded out- at least one broken rib there- and the stricken man cried out in pain.

“ *Stop .*” There was something steely in Daredevil’s calm voice, now. “What will killing Kingpin prove? And *this -*” he gestured towards the man on the ground, his eyes fixed on Tommy’s face. “What will this change? You’ll be no better than *him .*”

“Who says I’m tryin’ to be?”

“You don’t-”

“ *Shut up !*”

For a moment, both of them paused, equally startled by the sudden outburst. And then, before he knew it, Tommy was shouting.

“How long have you been trying to catch this guy? *How long ?* How many people have died for your fucking *mercy ?*” Tommy’s fists were clenched tightly enough to hurt. “So what if I’m not playing by the rules? *He* isn’t! He never was and he *never will !* There’s only one thing, *one thing* that matters now!”

Daredevil was staring at him, his head tilted but his mask expressionless.

“I win. They die. They *die* , alright? No more shitty half-measures. Patience will get you so far- blood is the only thing that gets you further.”

With a gasp that he was barely able to stifle, Tommy cut himself off. Techno’s old advice had sliced through the air like a sword, a memory that he had forgotten that he even had. His brother’s voice was still ringing in his mind, accompanied by the swish of blades and the growling of angry monsters. *Blood for the blood god .*

Across the room, Daredevil was saying something, something gentle and sincere. Tommy couldn't hear a single word. His wings already unfurling, he gave his enemy the double bird and strode out of the door.

Tommy couldn't sleep.

The wind was rushing softly outside the cracked window, sending a faint shower of raindrops pattering against the brick walls. In the distance, the sound of drilling and hammering echoed from the damaged buildings, the repair work already underway.

Curled up into a ball and wrapped tightly in Friend's fleece, Tommy listened. There was nothing else to do- well, nothing else except to sit and dwell on the way his stomach ached or his arms stung with fresh scratches.

His mind, of course, was racing. It never seemed to stop, now, even when he did manage to fall asleep. Fire crackled constantly at the edges of his thoughts, tearing through the warehouse in a storm of flame, incinerating brick and cloth and bone indiscriminately. He was holding Josh's body in his arms, clinging to it as though it were some twisted lifeline, and then suddenly Josh was gone and it was Pam who burned, Pam who stood trapped and choked by the heat and the smoke.

Blinking, he pressed his hands over his face. The fire had disappeared, though smoke still hung in the air, and he was shouting at Ghostbur, screaming as though his lungs would tear open, and the shade of his brother recoiled in pain, eyes wide and hurt, fading away into nothing.

Is there any way I can help you? Daredevil stood to one side, arms folded. *This isn't the right way.*

Maybe he was right.

Tommy could feel tears beginning to well in the corners of his eyes, and squeezed them shut. Bitter resentment flared in his chest, hot and grating against his ribcage. *What was he doing ?*

Josh- Josh wouldn't want this. He knew that. All he had wanted, all he had worked for in their time together, had been to make sure that Tommy was as safe and happy as possible. He had never once called for revenge or retribution. And he had never willingly put Tommy in danger.

What would he say, if he could see what Tommy was doing now? What would he do?

Get me some hot food. Make sure that I had a space close to the fire. Talk, sing, joke, ruffle my hair, give me a hug.

The tears were coming faster and faster, his breath hitching into muffled sobs. He was being *stupid*, he knew he was, but his hands were trembling and his jaw was clenched and he *couldn't stop crying*.

Dream's sick cackle of glee played in his head like a disc on repeat, accompanying the roar of the flames, the rumble of explosions. Kingpin stood beside him, hulking and motionless, as silent and deadly as a monstrous python.

Wilbur. Josh.

Pam.

Everything and everyone he had ever loved was gone, ruined, abandoned like broken dolls in the dust, and he knew exactly who to blame.

How could he possibly let Dream live? And Kingpin alongside him? How could he walk away, knowing that they still drew breath, gained power, reveling in chaos and cruelty? It was

just like he'd said to Daredevil. Nobody was stopping them. Nobody was even trying, not really. And Josh- gods, if Josh wanted a say in how Tommy lived his life, then he shouldn't have gone and gotten himself *killed* !

As abruptly as a punch to the gut, Tommy cut himself off. Nausea rolled through his stomach, and he took a shaky breath.

Fuck. *Fuck*.

He couldn't stay here. He couldn't keep sitting here like some pathetic child, shaking and sniveling and wishing for his brothers to come back.

He had people to kill.

Stuffing Friend's fleece back in his inventory, he rose to his feet, scrubbing the tears from his eyes. Before he had time to think, he was leaping from the open window, spreading his glowing wings wide.

The dying wind tugged at his feathers as he glided down in one smooth sweep. The moment his feet brushed the cold concrete, he broke into a run.

There was no direction, no plan. He barely paid attention to the route he was taking. All he knew was that he needed to move, and keep moving, because the moment he stopped then he might start *thinking* again.

Save for a few pools of light beneath streetlamps, the roads were dark and cold. A meager stream of cars trickled along the tarmac; exhausted night-shift workers looking to get home. Tommy knew that they wouldn't notice him.

Without realising it, he'd fallen into his new patrol around the neighborhood. Winding through dingy back alleys and along high streets lit with the garish glow of late-night shop fronts, he fought to keep his mind on his surroundings. Anything to avoid falling back into

the swirl of guilt-wracked memories. The wounds lining his arms were starting to build up, after all, and he really didn't want to risk damaging himself too badly to hunt. Now, though, his skull felt like a rush of white noise, static on a damaged comms screen.

The clattering of a bin in the distance- rapidly followed by a shout of fear- came as a relief. A good fight would be a welcome distraction, and he was out here for a reason, wasn't he? Already, he could feel his thoughts begin to clear, and he pulled Tubbo's bandanna down over his eyes as he sped up, racing toward the source of the commotion.

The scuffle, when he reached it, was nothing special. Just another thug with a big blunt knife held in one shaking hand, doing his best to loom over the unfortunate young man that he had cornered. Both victim and robber looked equally frightened, fighting to cling to any degree of composure; the threshold had been crossed. Now, there was no going back for either of them.

It was surprisingly easy, Tommy thought briefly, to slip into his new role. Though, perhaps he should have expected it. He'd spent his whole life playing parts, after all- revolutionary, soldier, politician, criminal. Vigilante was simply another to add to the list. Already, he was drawing himself up, clearing the choking tears from his throat. Already, the danger, the cold confidence and the quiet charisma were gathering around him, enveloping him.

Just another role to play.

"Gentlemen!" He spread his arms as both men jumped, jerking around to face him. In a flash of metal, the knife was pointed toward him, its dull edge gleaming faintly in the shaft of electric light slanting from the entrance to the alleyway. Utterly unfazed, Tommy continued, as casually as if they were old friends. "How are we all doing on this fine evening?"

"Red- Red Riot?" The thug's eyes had widened in amazement, as though he wasn't entirely sure he could believe what he was seeing. For a moment, he wavered, the knife dropping, and then he seemed to steel himself. "D-don't come any closer, yeah? Just stay out of this!"

There was a soft scuffle behind him as the guy he'd been trying to rob took off, sprinting for the safety of the road at the other end of the alley. He didn't look back, which was a relief- it was always easier when innocent people got themselves to safety as quickly as they could. Tommy focused once again on the shaking thug in front of him.

“That’s not how this works, big man.” Tommy kept his voice calm, even as the guy brandished the knife in his face. “Drop your weapon, though, and I’ll let you go. Promise.”

The man stared at him, mistrust and fear written all over his face. He didn’t move, though the blade still trembled in his outstretched arm. Tommy, for his part, simply stood there, his hands in his pockets and his head tilted to one side, pinning the thug down with an icy stare.

It didn’t take long for the robber’s nerve to shatter. The knife tumbled to the ground with a clatter, and then he was running, disappearing down a side road and out of sight. True to his word, Tommy watched him escape, faintly regretting his offer to let him go. Right now, he’d have liked nothing better than to punch someone, hard.

“That was very well handled.” The voice, calm and collected and horribly familiar, came from somewhere behind him. Instantly, Tommy’s blood was boiling, sending cracks shooting through the mask of his own composure.

No. Definitely not . The rush of anger was overwhelming, but he fought to block it out, to keep his cool. *Not dealing with this tonight.*

Without even acknowledging Daredevil’s presence, he began to walk away. How long would it take the fucker to realize that his ridiculous shadowing would get him nowhere?

“Wait!” The shout echoed off the brick walls as Daredevil dropped down onto the pavement behind him. “I can help you!”

Tommy didn’t turn around. “How many times do I have to tell you? I. Don’t. Need. Your. Help!” His fists were balled, face twisted in a snarl, but he refused to look at Daredevil. “Unless you want to let me hit you a couple more times, fuck off!”

“You want to hit me? You’re more than welcome to try.” Daredevil offered readily. “I’ll evade, but I won’t try to fight back. If you reckon you can land a hit, come on and have at it. But on one condition, alright? You’ll have to answer my questions in the meantime.”

I won't try to fight back?

Tommy paused. Surely, the bastard couldn't be telling the truth. Who in their right mind would just let their enemy attack them? Eyes narrowed, he glanced over his shoulder.

Daredevil merely stood there, his stance open. He opened his arms a little, inviting, as if in answer to Tommy's unspoken question.

What the hell? *What the hell ?!*

Tommy's sticks were out of his inventory and in his hands before he had time to think. Spinning on his heel, he lunged towards Daredevil, swinging one straight for his unprotected head. Infuriatingly, the bastard clocked the feint immediately and sprang back, neatly blocking the strike coming from below.

Without pausing for breath, Tommy was on the attack, advancing in a flurry of blows. Step by step, Daredevil pulled back, ducking and dodging, blurring away from each strike. He didn't make a single move to hurt Tommy but blocked his every swing with deft hands. Within seconds, Tommy's wings were spread wide, driving more power into his arms, beating in time with his steps. But the damned vigilante anticipated his every move, evading each fresh attack with irritating grace.

With a growl of rage, Tommy lashed out a blow that nearly unbalanced him, but barely grazed his enemy's side. For the briefest of moments, he hesitated, regathering himself, and Daredevil seized his opportunity.

"Why did you choose to do this?" There was genuine curiosity in the question. "What made you put on a mask and start attacking criminals?"

And even as he lunged back towards the vigilante, teeth bared and wings glowing, Tommy was turning the question over in his mind. *Why did you choose this?*

Because it had never been a choice, not really. Becoming a vigilante was just the first step on a relentless slog toward his revenge. But he had to admit, the mask- and the character- had proved more useful than he had anticipated. Shielded behind both, he was more powerful than he had ever been without them. Red Riot was strong where Tommy was weak, calm even as he raged, determined, and single-minded while Tommy's thoughts spiraled. Though Tommy would be the one to kill Dream, Red Riot would undoubtedly be the one to place the knife in his hands.

There was no way that he was planning on explaining all this to Daredevil, however.

"There are two people that need to die," He said, instead, his breath coming short as he threw another punch. "And I'm going to kill them." Glaring at his foe, he raised his chin arrogantly, a clear challenge that he knew would piss Daredevil off. To his surprise, though, the vigilante didn't take the chance to throw in a few hits of his own. Instead, he pulled back, studying him coolly.

"Why?" He asked, simply, ignoring the bait.

"Because they *deserve it*." Tommy's voice rose uncontrollably, and he took another swing at Daredevil's head. He had been so certain that a good fight would make him feel better, work some of the pent-up fury from his system- but so far, he'd only found himself growing angrier and angrier. Daredevil's stupid questions were infuriating him, and the fact that he had not yet managed to land a single hit wasn't helping.

"Killing them won't solve the problem though, will it?"

In that moment, Tommy would have liked nothing better than to scream. All he wanted was to knock Daredevil to the ground and lash out- with his sticks or his fists, who *cared* - again and again, beating him into the concrete, *anything* to make the bastard feel a tiny fraction of the pain that clawed at his insides, tore across his skin, threatened at every moment to swallow him whole. Red washed over his vision, and he pressed forwards with reckless abandon, swinging his sticks with brutal force.

“ *I spared him !*” He roared, as Daredevil deflected a punishing blow and twisted neatly out of the path of the next. “I spared him *once* , and he killed another one of my brothers!” His strikes were going wider and wider, all sense of precision fading. “I’m not showing him mercy again!”

“This-” Daredevil paused as he dodged once again- “This won’t bring your brother back. You know that. All it’ll do is make things worse.” His voice was gentle and patient, as though he were explaining something to an overexcited child. “We *will* deliver justice, I promise you. But not like this.”

“Oh yeah?” Tommy was gasping for breath now, his chest heaving as he drove a punch toward Daredevil’s throat. “You want to help me with that? Just like- like you helped Josh?”

And oh, *finally* , that got a reaction. Tommy kept going, ruthlessly, face twisted in a snarl. “Let me guess, you know a lawyer? Gonna help me throw them in prison, and toss away the key? And then what? *Then what?* ”

Daredevil was silent as he evaded the next few hits. He looked shocked, though it was difficult to tell his expression behind the material of the suit, and a little lost. Tommy seized his chance, lashing out with strike after strike, each one vicious and fast and more desperate than the last. Each, of course, pointless as the next, as they failed utterly to find their mark. “They’ll get out! They’ll escape, and they’ll come for revenge! They always do!”

“And we’ll catch them,” Daredevil insisted softly. “We’ll put them back in.” This time, as Tommy jerked the stick toward his face, he didn’t attempt to evade, but reached up and caught it in one hand, holding it still.

“And how many- of my brothers- will he kill when he gets out next- time?” Exhaustion was beginning to creep through Tommy’s veins now. Finally, his next blow connected, catching Daredevil in the ribs and knocking him back a step or two, but there was no sense of victory in the action. He was certain that if Daredevil had wanted to avoid the hit, he could have done so with ease. “How many- of the people I love- am I going to lose- because of your *right way* ?”

With a last burst of strength, he swung once again. The stick collided fruitlessly with Daredevil’s shoulder and snapped, splintering into two useless halves as the durability ran

out.

“I’m sorry.”

Daredevil let go of his other stick, giving him room to keep on fighting. But Tommy simply stood there, panting for air, his head spinning. There was no point in continuing, not now.

He was so tired,

“And I know,” Daredevil continued. “I *know* that the system isn’t perfect. It’s damaged and careless and it gets people hurt.” His head dropped, just a little, his arms falling to his sides. He sounded almost pleading as he kept on. “But the solution isn’t to break it down further. We can’t fix it, not entirely, but we have no choice but to *try* .”

Tommy stared at him blankly, too worn out to even attempt to argue. He was coming slowly to the realization that Daredevil really wasn’t trying to coerce or manipulate him into joining his side. The guy genuinely wasn’t trying to use him for his own ends. He just honestly believed the bullshit that he kept on talking about.

What was worse? To spew lies in an effort to recruit the vulnerable to your cause? Or to cling desperately to a futile hope that mercy was the right choice, regardless of the innocent being forced to take the consequences?

There was no point in fighting over it, either way. Slowly, Tommy backed away, spreading his wings wide, feeling the gusts of wind against his feathers.

“You can get your revenge,” Daredevil said, though Tommy barely heard him. “You don’t have to destroy yourself for it.”

He was too late. Tommy was already gone.

“Reckon they do some sort of color coordination for their costumes?” Foggy shook out the newspaper he was holding, revealing a blurry image of Red Riot plastered across the front page. “No way all of them picking red was just a coincidence.”

Beside him, Karen snorted with laughter. She reached for the paper, almost spilling her coffee, and paused in her stride to scan the article. “Well, it is a heroic color, isn’t it?” Passing the paper back to Foggy, she started walking again, the two of them tracing the familiar route to the office. “Maybe it’s just their favorite?”

“Perhaps,” Foggy conceded thoughtfully. “His scarf doesn’t exactly match though, does it?”

“Oh, give him a break. He’s new! Remember what Daredevil used to walk around in?”

They both chuckled at the memory. Knowing that Matt, of all people, had been the one underneath only made the situation funnier for Foggy, though Karen remained happily oblivious. “Anyway, the cause matters *way* more than the costume.”

“Oh? A fan of Red Riot, are we?” Foggy’s tone was teasing as he waved the newspaper in Karen’s direction. “Not even a full month on the streets and the man has himself a fan base!”

“I’ll have you know that I’m a fan of everyone seeking justice,” Karen informed him with mock haughtiness, and Foggy grinned.

“This guy’s reckless though, don’t you think? All this- shaking up Fisk’s operations. If he’s not careful, he’s going to end up at the bottom of the Hudson with concrete blocks around his feet.”

Karen winced at the image. “Maybe shaking things up is the idea, though. Give the tree a rustle, see what falls out?”

Foggy shook his head wisely. “All he’ll find in this tree will be coconut crabs, mark my words.”

A moment of hesitation. “...What?”

“Oh, you know, those big ones. Claws that’ll tear you to shreds!” The corners of Foggy’s mouth twitched as he imitated the pincers, making Karen chuckle.

“Come on, though, he’s definitely not going at this alone. Daredevil’s helping him, behind the scenes, there’s no way he isn’t.”

Foggy hummed thoughtfully under his breath. “If Riot even lets him.”

Fortunately, Karen didn’t hear him, and he continued hastily. “Anyway, what are we doing here? I mean, the coffee was definitely better, but it’s almost an hour back to the office.”

“Well- alright, it wasn’t really for the coffee. Though, I will admit- it’s a plus.” Karen’s voice was a little shy, even as she smiled. “I’m actually using this as a way to keep an eye out for Theseus.”

“Theseus? The kid Matt’s been looking for?”

“Yeah.” Karen’s smile dropped a little, her eyes clear and serious. “He’s still missing.”

“Yeah, but- how are you going to know who he is, even if you do find him?” Foggy frowned at her curiously. “Or are you just asking every kid you run into? Cause I’m pretty sure that’s the kind of thing that’s gonna get you on a list. And not exactly a good list, mind you.”

“Oh, shush!” Playfully, she swatted his arm. “I’m giving out some extra food at soup kitchens, asking around for anyone new, or anyone who seems especially lost.”

“And... Did you find anything?”

“Well. I haven’t got a single scrap on Theseus yet. I did help out a few other kids, though.” Karen’s expression stiffened, and she sighed. “Runaways, most of them. Abusive homes, negligent parents, you know the story.” Slowly, she shook her head. “I called CPS on the parents immediately, but... I don’t know. I wonder if I really did those kids a favor by landing them in the system.”

“Wasn’t much else you could do though, was there?” Foggy gave her a reassuring smile. “We’ve gotta have a little faith, at least.” Then the corner of his mouth twitched, and he gave her a gentle nudge in the ribs. “Though if the system really fails, we can always haul ‘em into court. Sic Matt on them!”

This time, though, Karen didn’t laugh. Instead, she came to a sudden stop and then turned on her heel to stare down the back alley that they had nearly walked by. Her eyes, Foggy realized, were trained on a small figure half-hidden behind a bin, huddled away out of sight. If Karen hadn’t spotted them first, Foggy knew that he would have missed them altogether.

Eyes wide, Karen took a step forward.

“Is that a kid?” She asked, her voice a little unsteady.

Wilson Fisk was not a man who scared easily and he knew it. Everyone knew it.

The events of the last few days, however, had stirred up a storm of unease in his mind.

The gleam of fractured light in the eyes of the offworlder boy lingered at the edges of his thoughts, shining out even as the flames had consumed him. The last glimpse he had caught of the child, before Dream had seized his arm and dragged him to safety through a hole he had smashed in the wall, had shown him something inhuman. Something bright and raging and winged, like some twisted angel, wreathed in flame.

Whatever it was that Dream had brought here, it was a much greater danger than he had implied. And that wasn't even taking the threat of Dream himself into account.

Wilson shook his head and cursed quietly under his breath. He'd believed himself to be dealing with another young fool struck with delusions of might and grandeur, and that mistake could cost him dearly. How on earth was he to have known, then, that he was in fact making a pact with something more akin to the Devil itself?

"Just what have you gotten us into this time, Fisk?" Madame Gao's voice had been as crisp and cold as ever, as cutting as the disappointment in her eyes. "Not merely feeding the wolf, but inviting him to play within the sheep pen?"

"I'm afraid I may have done just that." Though the words had stung faintly to say aloud, it would have done Wilson no good to lie to his allies. It would have been futile to try and cover up his mistake regardless.

"Then it's up to you to get this wolf back *out* ." Leland had snapped sharply. "This whole ordeal is losing us money. Get things back to normal- *fast*- and we might get out of this unscathed. Understand?"

Wilson took a deep breath as his last meeting rolled through his thoughts. He let it out slowly, gazing appreciatively at the beautiful scenery, quite ready to take his mind off that unpleasant conversation for a while.

The weather was glorious for an autumn evening; all burnished sunset and gentle breeze. He'd chosen a familiar park, one that he visited often to feed the ducks, and took his time walking to the bench across from the glimmering pond. There were no ducks now, of course,

but he'd brought a bit of bread with him out of habit, and before long, there was a small flock of pigeons gathered around his feet.

That was how Dream found him, strolling across the grass with his mask in place and his head at a jaunty angle, before throwing himself down on the bench beside him.

"You called?" He asked. "You've thought about the deal, then."

That same cheerful, lazy arrogance. That same cocky, vapid manner. How ridiculous it had seemed, then, how transparent. Another snot-nosed boy grown too big for his boots, hiding his face behind a silly mask.

Now, all Wilson could hope was that there was still a bit of the human left underneath.

For the time being, he ignored the question. Keep his calm, keep his well-earned confidence. "Do you know, I was rather like you when I was your age." Idly, he threw the last of the bread to the pigeons and sat back. "I've spent much of my life alone. And for many years, I believed that this was the source of my strength." Memories of his father were beginning to sneak into his mind's eye, and he toyed casually with his cuffs, choosing his words very carefully indeed.

"I told myself that I had free will- all the freedom in the world. And during that time, I achieved a great deal."

And he had. Single-handed and ruthless, he had built an empire, brick by heavy brick. He had laid the foundations on the corpses of those who had tried to oppose him and used the sweat and tears of his followers to mix his concrete. Slowly, Kingpin had risen, step by bloodstained step.

"But still, I was not fulfilled." He turned to face Dream fully, hoping against hope that he would be able to reach the man beneath the mask. "I was looking for something, something that I believed must surely be unreachable. I longed for a connection that I could only dream of. Imagining and searching and hoping, and never finding."

“So? What changed?” The boy- the ordinary boy, for now at least- asked. There was genuine curiosity in his tone as he leaned closer.

“I found love.”

For a moment, Dream seemed taken aback. And then he burst into a peal of ringing laughter, honest and surprised, as though Wilson had just told an excellent joke.

Wilson laughed with him; the boy’s guffaw was contagious, and his own rising memories were happy ones. For the briefest of seconds, as the commotion caused the pigeons to scatter in a flurry of feathers and the warm sunlight glittered off the pond, there was real cheer in the air.

“And then, I thought that I had found true freedom. It was too much for me, at first. I thought I might explode with the power that she brought me. She was my world, and the world, somehow, was mine.” He smiled as he recounted those first, blissful days. “But once it passed, I discovered the great lie at the heart of love. And that what I had taken to be true freedom was, in fact, precisely the reverse.”

Now, he had Dream’s full attention. The laughter had vanished, and Wilson found himself pinned beneath the intensity of his stare.

“Any prison can be built, engineered from stone and steel and impenetrable locks- but even then, you merely present the prisoner with a challenge. Any truly determined man will find his way out. But love...” He sighed deeply. “Love is the perfect prison.”

“Then- take the deal!” There was confusion in Dream’s voice now, a layer of disbelief that anyone could refuse such a simple exchange. “XD would free you from that prison in a heartbeat!”

“Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong.” Wilson chuckled faintly at the young man’s foolishness. “I am a willing prisoner, now and forever. I have given her my soul as surely as you have

given yours. There is nothing left for that false god of yours to take.”

Dream hummed softly. He didn’t exactly sound happy about Fisk’s words- but then again, he didn’t appear angry, either. “What did you call me all the way here for, then?”

Wilson folded his arms and sat forwards, studying his companion’s blank mask. “What is your plan?” He tilted his head, hoping for a shred of insight into this creature’s mind. Anything that might help him anticipate its next move. “What do you want from our world?”

“What do I want?” Dream chuckled languidly, leaning back. “Well, all of it, of course. Wasn’t that obvious?”

Wilson Fisk was not a man who scared easily.

But those words were enough to turn his blood to ice.

Dream’s laughter rose into a wheeze as he caught sight of Fisk’s frozen expression. “You’re useful, especially now. It’s still early in the game! And I did offer you a spot among the rest of my apostles. If you’re not gonna take it, though, there isn’t really much I can do!” He shrugged calmly, still gazing at Fisk’s face. “I can’t really force you to serve me. Not in any meaningful way, at least. You’ve gotta agree to that on your own.”

“This truly is all just a game to you, isn’t it?” Wilson was more shaken than he was willing to let on. He was speaking almost before he was thinking, much too fast for safety.

“Of course it is!” Dream threw his head back as he laughed once again. “It’s the best game there is!”

“Then- what about the boy?” Wilson asked. How *did* Theseus fit into this monster’s plan? What on earth could one- albeit powerful- child do to stop him? “What do you need him for?”

“What- Tommy?” Dream sounded surprised, as though he couldn’t quite work out why Tommy would be important in this situation. “He’s nothing. Just a means to an end.” He shook his head slightly, faintly bewildered. “Oh, wait- you meant the bounty on him, didn’t you?”

Carelessly, he reached forwards into empty space and withdrew a pair of dark, swirling bars of metal. “Here- two netherite ingots, just as I promised.”

Wordlessly, Wilson reached out to take them. The metal was cool and grounding in his hands, an anchor for his racing thoughts. The offworlder metal had rather intrigued him when he had first learned about it. Now, it didn’t quite seem worthy of the price.

“Ah, Fisk.” The demon beside him laughed and kept laughing, as the few remaining pigeons scattered for the cover of the trees. “It won’t be long until I’m done here. And by the time I finish-” His mask twisted unnaturally, a great slash opening up where once an eerie blank smile had been drawn. The mouth gaped wider and wider, dark and endless as if trying to swallow the world whole. “Death herself will be kneeling to me!”

Chapter 9

Chapter by [FightingAgainstTheDawn](#), [Sunfish \(FightingAgainstTheDawn\)](#)

Chapter Notes

Hi guys 🙌,

Just Sunfish here!

Butterfly-nerd's been busy with IRL stuff, so they haven't had time to go over the next few chapters, but I decided not to make you wait any longer and just post what's ready for now.

When butterfly-nerd has free time, they can go over and edit whatever they want, and if that happens, please go back and re-read them again. I promise you won't regret it! It'll sound so much better!

In the meantime, though, hope you'll like this.

A bit of a disclaimer - English isn't my first language, and I'm a bit dyslexic, so if you see any mistakes, do point them out. I'll go over and fix them!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Two weeks had passed since the fight with the offworlders and the vicious monster they had released upon New York. Things had been quiet since then luckily so the Avengers had had time to prepare.

Fury had taken the lead in this - pulling all available information on them so they could study their opponents as much as possible while they healed. In the end, Tony was fairly confident they had a good counter strategy planned out even though had no idea what other abilities the offworlders could be hiding.

They were still a few members short. Wanda had mostly recovered, but the doctors were still insisting that she stay in bed so they could monitor her condition and Vision had agreed with them. He'd also decided to stay with her during the fight and provide backup if he was needed.

Banner would also be staying back to work on figuring out the portal and Tony...

"Absolutely not." Steve had said sternly after he'd tried to bring up the idea of coming with them.

"But I can still..."

“No! Tony, your shoulder almost got torn off!” The former soldier cut him off again. “You’re not fit for duty yet, you’ll stay here and rest. You can control the armored suit from the tower.” Tony had bristled at that tone and Steve had realized his mistake. The former soldier took a breath to calm down and continued, this time not like he was his commander, but as his friend. “I know that controlling the suit remotely isn’t going to be as good as you actually being there with us,” he said, his gaze never wavering from Tony’s as he spoke. “But I’d rather have to fight without you once than have you injure yourself so bad you wouldn’t be able to fight with us ever again.”

And that had been the end of it. Tony had been benched in the tower.

As much as he hated to admit it, Steve was right. Tony would just be a liability out there. He’d be far more useful to them from the tower, observing the situation from above and giving them directions as needed. It was a good plan, even though his pride wasn’t yet willing to accept it.

He pushed these thoughts aside for now though since Peter had come in. He was in the new Spider-Man suit Tony had made for him and that eased some of his worries. Karen, as Peter had called his AI, was more than equipped to help him and had instructions to immediately contact him if things got out of hand.

The kid was nervous as well, jittery with energy like a first-time public speaker, pacing back and forth and fidgeting with his costume.

“You can do it, Peter,” Steve said to him encouragingly, a hand on his shoulder.

“If anything happens we’re just a call away.” Tony remained, tapping at his earpiece.

“Thanks,” Peter nodded, pulling his mask over his face. “Okay, I’m ready!”

And he was off.

Tony watched helplessly as they sent the kid ahead of them, Peter taking the longer route around so he could reach the enemy base without being seen.

They’d wait a day and then attack, hopefully giving Peter enough time to get the offworlder kids out safely and distract the others so they would have time to escape.

Tony cursed under his breath, they couldn't afford a repeat of last time. He really didn't know what he'd do if anything happened to Peter or anyone on the team.

"Let's get ready to head out as well," Steve said beside him. "We've got a lot of work ahead of us."

Tony nodded. He'd make sure they had the upper hand on the offworlders this time.

The voices were a wordless, ceaseless hum at the back of Techno's head.

They had been acting strange lately, strange even for an existence such as them.

It was unnerving. They seemed to know more about this world somehow but, to his annoyance, wouldn't answer any of Techno's questions.

He could still hear every word they said, they couldn't hide from him any more than he from them, but they purposefully spoke in such a way that he would not understand.

Are we on Earth-616?

Which timeline is this?

First, we need to establish where we are in the canon!

I mean, Iron-man's alive so pre-endgame obviously...

Peter is here too so we have to be somewhere after civil war!

Wait, so are we actually in the MCU?

Let's kill Thanos! Blood for the blood god!!!!

Shh! No metagaming!

Techno sighed, there was no way he could make sense of any of this nonsense.

He stepped aside to let Niki pass, the latter carrying a heavy stack of raw stakes as she headed for the portal room, and turned to continue his argument with Tubbo.

“There are people after us,” he said for what felt like the millionth time. “They are trying to kill us. What would you have us do?”

“Dream could be torturing Tommy right now for all we know and we’re just sitting around here waiting to be attacked!” Tubbo shouted, stomping after him. Ranboo flinched at the shouting but followed close. He didn’t look like he entirely disagreed with his friend either.

“They have more people and resources than us,” Techno reminded them. “And they know the terrain better. I’d rather fight them here, where we’ve had time to prepare for them, than outside where they’d have the advantage.”

Techno gave Phil the stack of arrows he’d been carrying, the avian just grinned as he saw the tips and took them eagerly.

“We don’t even know for sure if they’re even coming!” Tubbo kept arguing.

“Oh, trust me, they’re coming alright,” Techno said calmly. “We hit them pretty hard last time, even released a Wither. They definitely perceive us as a high-priority threat now. They’ll come and they’ll be prepared.”

They had been at this argument for about an hour now and it was becoming harder and harder for Technoblade to keep his composure. Tubbo was stubborn and reckless and, Techno understood - very, very afraid.

That didn't make him less annoying though.

"Just admit it!" Tubbo shouted, "You don't actually care about Tommy, you just came here for the fight!"

"Tubbo!" Ranboo said sharply, surprising both of them. "You're being unfair! We're all worried for Tommy, but we can't just charge in recklessly!"

Tubbo blinked twice before his anger caught up to him and he whirled on the half-enderman, making Ranboo step back. "Oh, so you're taking his side now?"

"I'm not taking anyone's side!" Ranboo protested, for once standing his ground.

"Well, I am!" Tubbo announced. "I'm taking Tommy's side! And if you guys won't do anything to save him then I'll go do it myself!"

And with that he left the room, slamming the door so hard Techno saw a crack forming on the doorframe.

He sighed and looked at Ranboo. "What do you think?"

"Wh- Me?" The half-ender choked, surprised to be asked this directly. "I...I..."

Techno understood that Ranboo had a hard time expressing his opinions so he usually let him speak at his own pace, but he was tired now and he had no energy to dance around the bush.

"You looked like you agreed with some of what he was saying." Techno prompted. "Care to elaborate?"

“Well, may- maybe... we could- could also do something to find Dream while we wait?” Ranboo stuttered a bit, but his speech became smoother as he gathered momentum. “Maybe, if- while Dream is distracted by this fight, we could try and find out where he’s keeping Tommy and snatch him away?”

Techno nodded, it wasn’t a bad suggestion. “Go with Tubbo. Take as many supplies and weapons as you’ll need.”

“But... Are you sure?” The half-endermen asked, worried as if this was some sort of test.

“It’s fine, It’s not entirely a bad idea. We’ll make sure to distract Dream.” Techno reassured. “Be careful though, keep each other safe.” Ranboo searched Techno’s face for a moment, then set his shoulders in determination as he nodded and followed Tubbo into the room they shared.

Techno sighed and took out the Art Of War, just holding the book in his hands calmed him down and made the voices subside a bit.

He knew that strategically, this was their best course of action. That didn’t stop him from worrying just the same.

“You’re nervous,” Phil said quietly from the rafters where he’d made a nest for himself. “You think there’s a chance we lose the fight, don’t you? That’s why you sent the two away?”

“We dealt Dream a pretty big blow, but I doubt this was his only hand,” Techno said. “Those guy’s weren’t weak and they’ll be prepared for us this time.”

“Well, I wouldn’t count us out just yet,” Phil said with a grin and Techno tried to match it. “Come what may, we’ll fight till the bitter end.”

“Stop following me!” Deadpool whispered furiously, exasperated by the phantom's antics. He'd dressed in his finest suit for the occasion and already it had blue stains over it and... well okay this one was blood, and maybe the edges were a bit frayed, but it was the only suit he owned that wasn't completely ruined in a fight so it would have to do.

“How do you know I'm following you? I could just be going in the same direction!” The stupidly named Ghostbur said haughtily, continuing to trail after the mercenary, as they both entered the underground gala.

Deadpool seethed, his hand twitched towards his gun, but he knew that shooting at a ghost would be just as effective as shooting himself so he just clenched his jaws and kept walking.

He entered the hall and threw his coat at the person who looked most like a valley. Nobody stopped him, tried to take his weapons, or asked for his invitation, no such thing was needed here. At first glance, this appeared to be a high-end event - all sharp suits, sparkling wine, and women in even sparkler dresses, mingling in the quiet whispers of polite society.

All illusions of respectability were shattered however by the sight of the guests' masks. Not carnival masks, mind, but well-known villain's masks.

This was a gathering of the criminal elite. The amount of stolen wealth on display here tonight was enough to fund a small country's economy for years if not even decades. These were not petty thieves or low-level criminals, but individuals with connections and resources that extended far beyond the city limits. The heads of mafia families and power-hungry supervillains were all present, brazenly flaunting their wealth for all to see.

“Wow...” Ghostbur whispered anxiously, moving a bit closer to Wade as they drew some sharp glances from the “esteemed” guests.

Deadpool didn't let any of the glares stop him though, he strolled right in amongst them as if this was his own backyard.

“The circus looked more fun when I was a kid,” he commented offhandedly and took a glass of champagne and a handful of appetizers from one of the waiters.

Wade wasn't exactly on good terms with anyone here, sure he wasn't a hero, but he certainly wasn't a villain either. He was a mercenary and money was his moral guideline, he didn't particularly care about what any of them thought about him.

As he moved along carelessly through the crowd he bumped into someone. GEICO Gecko's emo brother - The Lizard looked down at him sharply. The overgrown reptile hissed, annoyed

at seeing the olive paste stain on his fancy suit. He looked at Wade angrily, sharp teeth wide on display, but the mercenary wasn't impressed.

"Oof," Deadpool grimaced, waving his hand in front of his face. "Ever heard of a mint? Though I doubt they've invented one strong enough to mask sewage breath yet..." The Lizard just snapped its jaws threateningly at him, but otherwise didn't move to start a fight.

None of them could cause any trouble at one of Kingpin's famous galas, not unless they wanted to get permanently excluded from all the business the mayor of New York brought.

Wade made his way to the stage right as they were carting away some huge statue, its legs broken off. It was no doubt a religious icon, freshly stolen from some third country temple that could do nothing about it, only to be sold at an exorbitant price as a garden ornament to some rich fuck.

Deadpool sighed and shoved some no-name villain off his place, taking his seat. The guy to his right gave him a passing glance but didn't object, just kept watching the stage up front.

The guy shivered a bit though, wrapping himself tighter in his cloak even though the room's temperature hadn't changed.

He couldn't see the phantom that was partially phasing into him, but apparently, he still felt him. The mercenary threw a quick glance through the crowd, ignoring both of them.

Luckily little Theseus was nowhere in sight.

Deadpool wasn't really here for the auction, he didn't much care for art or stolen artifacts so he usually skipped these events, but tonight there would be something different. Word around the street was that Kingpin had some interesting new associates. If you do a job for them, he'd heard, you might get access to weapons and technology from another world. Alien tech was pretty sweet, he'd had the chance to play with a few pieces salvaged from the invasion so he had figured it'd be worth it to at least check it out.

And that was it! That was the only reason he'd come. This had nothing to do with Death's kid! He was a mercenary after all, he had to earn money somehow, put bread on the table, and whatnot. Not everything had to be related to the offworlders.

"Hello gentlemen," Kingpin's voice sounded from the stage, the crowd quieting immediately as they all moved to find a place to sit. "The time you're all probably waiting for has finally arrived." Deadpool tried to pay attention to Kingpin as he was rambling about the event and the people gathered, but he couldn't ignore the ghost who was currently tracing dicks and

smiley faces onto people using his blue goo. With amusement, he wondered if others could see the marks if not the ghost.

“I was asked to help arrange this by my new friend. I’ll let him explain the details.” At those words, Wade's attention immediately snapped back as Kingpin stepped aside to let the figure behind him take center stage.

He cursed under his breath. Of-fucking-course everything would be related to the offworlders.

“Hello!” Dream greeted the crowd excitedly. He was wearing a simple bright green sweatshirt and jeans, completely at odds with the suits and ties of everyone else. He still had that mask on, though now it looked silly instead of sinister, like a cheap cosplay of a comic book villain. “Thank you all for coming here! I’ll skip the boring preamble and get straight to the point.” He looked young - tall and gangly and a bit awkward. If Wade hadn’t fought against him he’d think the guy was just a harmless teenager.

“Dream!” Ghostbur shouted excitedly, waving his hands around and jumping up and down. Wade cringed and tried to move away from the ghost, but if Dream actually saw him he didn’t let it show.

“I have a job I need done and I think you’ll find the price worth your time!” Dream said once he had everyone’s attention, the silly mask of his grinning at the audience. “This is the Warden’s armor!” He announced as an armor stand was brought to the stage. It was a glorious thing, sleek and sturdy, the dark purple metal it was made of shimmering dimly from the runes grafted into its surface.

The crowd steered, whispering wildly at one another. They had all heard the rumors, a metal as strong as vibranium, but without the strict control over its import and distribution...

A video started playing on the huge monitor above the stage, showing off the armor’s capabilities. It was a pretty impressive display - the guy wearing it was shot several times, with increasingly more deadly weapons, each time coming out unscathed. The armor itself didn’t even look dented!

Villains and scientists alike were salivating at the prospects of this new piece of technology.

“To get this armor, however,” Dream continued, catching their attention once again. “You will have to bring me some offworlders!”

The crowd erupted again, this time more angrily. "I ain't taking on the fucking offworlders!" Shouted someone. "Didn't you see what that thing of theirs did to the city?"

"Yeah!" Another chimed in. "Let the Avengers deal with those freaks!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Kingpin stepped in, shouting over the crowd. "Settle down, please! We're not asking you to go after the strong ones that were fighting the Avengers!" He said placatingly. "As you said they are strong, but not all offworlders are equal!" The video of the armor demonstration stopped and disappeared, replaced by pictures of all the known offworlders.

Some of them were pictures of Sappnap and his two friends as they were fighting the first night. Others were of the Avengers, fighting against ones that Deadpool didn't know - a winged guy, a skull-masked one, and a woman.

"Hey, that's us!" Ghostbur exclaimed beside him. "That's Dadza and Techno and Niki!" The ghost kept rambling nonsense, but Deadpool tuned him out.

There wasn't a picture of Tommy among them, not to mention one of Dream or his accomplice. This was understandable since they were the ones behind all this, but... Where had they taken these photos from? Did they get that close to the fights? Or perhaps...

SHIELD was compromised, Deadpool realized bitterly.

"These are your two targets," Dream continued, zooming in on what seemed like two teenagers - one of them looked like a short little goat boy while the other was a tall, lanky fella with horns and a tail, half of him painted black while the other was white. Goat boy was holding a wicked-looking crossbow while the other was awkwardly gripping a sword behind him.

"Tubbo and Ranboo!" Ghostbur exclaimed, pointing excitedly, not seeming to fully understand what was happening around him. Wade groaned internally, the fucker just had to go for the kids...

"This tall one is half Ender," Dream warned them. "He can teleport so you should aim to knock him out first."

“You want us to go after kids?” Someone else asked from the crowd, sounding a bit bewildered, but others didn’t seem to have the same reservations.

“You want them dead or alive?” A cranky old man with a bald head and bad fashion sense asked.

“Alive if possible.” Dream said, but after a bit of consideration added, “I’d rather get them dead than not at all though.”

“I’ll take this!” a guy with what looked like a fishbowl on his head announced. “This suit of yours better be worth it.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm planning to post next chapter this Friday, in the meantime let's play who's that villain! I'll give you a hint - It's not Pikachu ;)

Also, special thanks to Always_Wrong for the continued support! It's very appreciated ♥

Chapter 10

Chapter by [FightingAgainstTheDawn](#), [Sunfish \(FightingAgainstTheDawn\)](#)

Chapter Notes

Hi guys 🙌

I'm awake at this ungodly hour so here's another chapter as promised!

A bit of warning for the first bit - there are depictions of blood and violence. I tried not to make things too graphic, but still - let me know if I need to put a stronger warning or something.

Otherwise, hope you enjoy ♥

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Fisk entered the room he'd given to the offworlders.

Once it had been an extravagant master suite at one of the high-end hotels in Hell's Kitchen, with lavish decorations and expensive furniture fit for a king. Now It was ruined beyond repair.

To be completely honest with himself, Fisk hadn't particularly liked these rooms before. He'd found all those twirls too much for his liking, favoring instead the simpler things - minimal decoration and a focus more on functionality rather than looks. This, though... this he liked far less.

He stepped carefully over the strung-about rubble, trying not to step onto glass as he listened to the shouts coming from the other room.

"Who's the one giving that order?" It was the voice of that mercenary offworlder, Punz if he remembered his name correctly. "You? Or is this XD speaking?"

Fisk stepped over a broken painting, the gilded frame was beyond saving and the canvas was ripped.

It had been Vanessa that had picked the paintings for this suite.

“Are you doubting me?” Dream’s voice was low and dangerous, but his companion didn’t seem to care.

“I’m not doubting you, Dream. But I want to be sure it’s still you I’m following.” At that the mercenary stormed off, pushing Fisk violently out of his way as he did so.

The kingpin shook his head but didn’t take it personally. He could sympathize with the man’s anger. It was hard to find a good leader to follow these days. Perhaps he could help him later.

For now, though he had to focus on the main threat. He pushed those thoughts away and looked into the living room, though to call it that was a bit ironic at the moment considering it was filled with corpses.

He stepped through the threshold, fully entering the nightmare. The stench was like a slap to the face.

Fisk wasn’t a stranger to violence, he’d seen his fair share of it. He knew what came out of a man when you broke him, knew what to expect, and yet...

The sight in front of him was gruesome enough to make him pause.

Dream was sitting in the middle of it, a spider poised at the center of his web, the corpses arranged around him. Fisk stilled his face, trying not to show anything as he surveyed the six bodies. None of them still breathing.

They were all tied up and gagged, the looks on their faces were almost peaceful as if death had been a mercy.

Fisk moved in closer despite himself, trying to figure out the reasons behind this slaughter.

The first victim was a young man, scattered before him were books that looked like they’d been part of the lectern. From what Fisk could tell, the axe that was used to chop it to pieces was now lodged in the man’s chest.

Next to him was an older woman, her head was chopped clean off and her wide straw sun hat was on the ground beside her, soaked in her blood. There was something like a composter sitting in front of her, the smell of rotting plants mixing in with the stench of blood.

Another man, his guts spilling out of him, had in front of him a weird contraption. Something that looked like it belonged in a chemistry lab, veils brewing seemingly without a fire to heat them up.

Bile rose up in him, but Fisk suppressed it. He looked around at all of them: men, women, young, old—the offworlders, it seemed, didn't discriminate.

All these people, broken and left there—like dolls roughly discarded by a petulant child after the game was over—because things hadn't played out the way he'd wanted them to.

“I’m guessing that whatever this was supposed to be didn’t work out,” he remarked coolly.

“That’s an understatement,” Dream laughed, but it had no joy in it. He seemed tired. “Sorry about this mess, we got a bit carried away.”

Fisk arched an eyebrow, making a show of looking around at the corpses again. “A mess indeed.”

“They refused to stay in the mine carts.” Dream shrugged as if that was supposed to somehow explain or justify what had happened.

“What were you trying to achieve by kidnapping those people?” Fisk wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer but asked anyway.

Dream hesitated for a moment, “We don’t have much time,” he explained. “This reality... it’s rejecting us. Things have stopped working - once you place a block down you can no longer pick it up that easily. Crafting still works, but only with materials from our world and villager trading, well...” he gestured at the corpses.

Villager trading? What was that supposed to mean? What had this madman expected to happen?

Fisk filled those questions away for later however because something more pressing had caught his attention.

“Rejecting you, you say,” he started, trying to appear nonchalant about it. “And what exactly will happen if this reality rejects you?”

Dream looked at him sharply, for a second Fisk thought he wouldn’t answer, but then- “I’m not sure,” he said simply. “We could end up stuck in the void between the worlds. Or we could just be completely assimilated into this reality. We’d become like these villagers - mindless NPCs, roaming around.” The last part was said bitterly, as if it was the worst thing Dream could imagine.

“Is that how you see us? Like mindless NPCs?” Fisk couldn’t help but ask.

“A large part of you, yeah.” Dream said plainly, not even bothering to hide it. “But don’t worry about us. We’ll create a seed for this world before any of that happens.”

“A seed?”

“You don’t need to concern yourself with the details.” Dream said dismissively.

“I see.” It would do him no good to push further, he’d gotten more answers than he thought he would.

“In the meantime, this experiment wasn’t a total bust. There’s something else I’d like to try now.” Dream handed him a small scrap of paper with something hastily scheduled onto it. “Here’s a list of the materials I’ll need. Let me know when they’ll be ready.”

Fisk looked down at it and frowned, not able to hide his confusion. “Why on earth would you need this much obsidian?”

Dream just shrugged, the mask turned towards him as if to mock him for even asking. “It has to be from your world apparently otherwise it wouldn’t work,” he said simply, not really

explaining anything.

“What about... ‘this mess’?”

“Just get rid of them, I don’t need them anymore.” Dream waved him off, annoyed at having to deal with him further.

Fisk grit his teeth at being treated like an errand boy but managed a simple nod.

He needed to be careful around this man, bide his time until he could figure out how to get rid of him without having to face that god of his.

For now, he just bowed his head and went out.

The cold night air bit at his fingertips as the world spun around Tommy, threatening to spill him onto the dingy alleyway below. He staggered as his wings dissipated, and barely managed to catch himself on the rooftop.

He was so hungry and tired, he hadn’t had much to eat these past few days and the patrols were taking their toll on him. Not to mention the nightmares that hadn’t let him sleep. He felt dizzy, his legs were weak and shaky and the sharp taste of copper filled his mouth.

Spending all of his remaining energy trying to hit and then fleeing from that red-suited bastard certainly hadn’t helped his condition.

It was actually surprising that the guy hadn’t beaten him to a pulp and dragged him to prison actually. If he hadn’t just let him go Tommy wouldn’t have had any energy left to fight him. He’d barely had enough to jump a few streets over.

There was no way he could get back to his base tonight, not in this condition. He needed a safe place to huddle in.

Tommy stood up and fought to stay upright as darkness overtook his vision. He wanted to spread his wings one last time so he could glide to the alleyway below, but all he accomplished was a spark before he was plummeting downwards.

He was falling. Falling like he'd wanted to all those months ago from that makeshift dirt pillar he had made.

What was he doing? Why was he out here, in another world, trying to kill a fucker he hadn't even met and Dream on top of that? Who was he kidding? Playing at being hero... he was just pathetic.

He hadn't even made an attempt to save himself, but something cushioned his fall regardless. It smelled worse than death, but he had no more energy or will left in him to move.

He wanted to go home. He wanted to feel safe and protected huddled under Phil's wing. He wanted to eat Techno's potato stew and hear him reading stories. He wanted Tubbo and Ranboo and... and...

And he wanted Wilbur to be alive and well and with them.

None of that was possible though.

As he lay there in the darkness, staring up at the starless skies above, Tommy didn't even have the energy to cry.

"Hey there, are you alright?" A voice was asking from somewhere far away, the world slowly, and forcefully, coming into focus around him.

He was laying on something soft, though the shape was weird. It didn't feel like a bed, more like a bunch of lumpy cushions strewn about aimlessly.

It wasn't the most uncomfortable thing he'd slept on.

"Should we call an ambulance maybe?" another voice joined the first as words began to have meaning once more.

The smell though... the stench of rot and filth assaulted Tommy's nostrils threatening to dig into his brain. He opened his eyes a slit, the light blinding him for a moment, and then Phil's cool hand was on his forehead and all was right with the world. He leaned into the touch, ready to fall asleep again despite the smell and the discomfort.

"You're burning up!" A woman's voice said, and he opened his eyes again to see who was talking.

That wasn't Phil!

Tommy jumped up, scaring the blonde woman that had woken him up, and winced as his arm throbbed. He looked around frantically.

He felt like shit. And he smelled even worse! Where was he?

Oh right, he'd passed out in some alleyway...

"Are you alright?" The woman asked again, continuing to pester him. She was tall, thin, and blond and looked at Tommy with such pity that he could have puked if he had anything in him to throw up.

"You were passed out, do you want us to call someone? Parents or a guardian?" The other voice piped up again, a short and chubby dude with blond hair and blue eyes. He was standing hesitantly a bit back as if he wasn't really sure he wanted to be involved in all of this.

"Fuck off, the both of ya." Tommy cursed, dismissing them both, voice still hoarse from sleep. He swapped the woman's hand away and stood up. She helped to steady him as he staggered, but he shook her off again. "I said fuck off!" he shouted this time and the two moved away to give him space, hands raised as if he was a stray dog that had suddenly gone aggressive. Tommy shook his head and strode onto the street, looking around.

Where the fuck was he? He didn't recognize the streets around him.

He winced as he tried to move his arm again, his shoulder was definitely sprained. Not to mention he was so hungry he would have probably considered eating Henry, were she still around.

“Kid, you look like you’re about to pass out again, do you want some water? Or maybe something to eat?” The man asked but didn't come any closer.

“I’m not some charity case! I'm perfectly fine! Now. Fuck. Off.” Tommy reiterated. Now, where could he actually go? The pile of trash behind him could potentially have something to eat in it... Nah, it smelled horrid, plus he'd have to stay with these two losers.

“Wait, we um... you’re not a charity case, of course!” The annoying woman persisted. “We have some questions for you! If you answer, we'll get you some food.”

Tommy froze at that. He hated that he was considering this but... he was very hungry. “What questions?”

“Easy ones.” The man stepped in. “But you’ll have to answer honestly before we give you the food.”

“Nah, I’m not playing this game until I see the food on offer.”

“I can give you this sandwich now.” The blond offered, holding a paper bag. The word sandwich rang in Tommy’s ears. “I got it for a colleague of mine, but he’s been annoying me lately so you can have it instead, deal?”

“What is it?” Tommy blurted out without thinking.

“What?”

“The sandwich. Is it ham and cheese?”

Everyone likes those, right? The ghost's words passed through his mind, bringing him back to that first night he'd spent in this world.

“Umm... prosciutto and mozzarella.” The man read out. Tommy just stared at him blankly. “Yeah, it’s basically ham and cheese, just the Italian version.” He handed him the paper bag and Tommy took it cautiously. “I’ll give it to you now, after you answer our questions we can go to the bakery over there and get some cake. How does that sound?” Tommy’s stomach answered that question for him.

He took the offered bag and looked inside. It was nothing like the sandwich Josh had bought him that first night. It was huge like an entire loaf of bread had been cut open and stuffed with meat, cheese, and vegetables.

Tommy’s mouth watered. It looked delicious.

“What’s italian?” He asked absentmindedly, still staring at the sandwich in his hands.

"The style," the man said, but continued after receiving another blank stare. "It’s from Italy? The country in Europe?"

Tommy just shrugged, he didn’t understand, but he didn’t really care much at this point. “What are your questions then?” He asked as he took a large bite. It was heavenly.

“Let’s start with what’s your name,” the woman said. “Mine’s Karen and this is my friend and colleague - Foggy.”

“That’s a weird name,” Tommy said through a mouthful.

“It’s a nickname.” The man shrugged, “Franklin just doesn't suit me.”

Tommy nodded and introduced himself in turn. “I’m Tommy.”

“Do you have a family?” Karen asked gently.

“Not in this world.”

Meanwhile, a few streets over, Matt woke up tired in more ways than one. He stood up and cursed softly as his alarm clock read out the time to him. He'd overslept. Karen and Foggy were probably already at the office wondering where he was.

Last night's events, still fresh in his mind, didn't let him rest though. Maybe there was some truth to what Red Riot was saying. Maybe he really was letting good people suffer for his ideals.

He pulled a shirt gingerly over his head, the bruise on his side throbbing as he did so.

No, he shook his head, the ends couldn't justify the means. If that was true then Kingpin's plan to reduce crime by controlling all of it would also be a good one. They needed to do better, to *be* better.

He made his way to the office, the scent of fresh-brewed coffee wafted through the air, teasing his senses as he climbed the stairs. It seemed like Karen had gone to that new place again. He wondered why she was doing that, the coffee wasn't good enough to warrant the long walk back, but... well if she liked it then it wasn't his business really.

His fingertips traced the familiar contours of the walls, feeling his way with practiced precision as he found the door to his office. He opened it and froze.

Karen and Foggy weren't around, but there was someone sitting at his desk. Someone that Matt could recognize immediately, even though he wasn't currently wearing his mask.

Red Riot was in his office, in civilian clothes, and eating an entire cake.

"Ay up," the vigilante greeted him calmly and Matt fumbled a bit before realizing - he wasn't wearing his costume. Neither of them were. He knew that the kid in front of him was Red Riot, but he had no idea who Matt was.

“Hello,” he greeted back, trying to remain calm. “I wasn't aware we had a client scheduled.” Lying always left a bitter taste in his mouth, but he doubted Red Riot would appreciate seeing him again, especially since last night.

“Cause I’m not your client,” Red answered tersely, shoving another piece of cake straight into his mind. “What's with the glasses and the cane?”

Matt's lips twitched briefly as he tried to suppress his surprised laughter at the direct question. Most people were more careful, but without the mask, the young vigilante acted much more his age, evidently. “I’m blind,” Matt answered, “The cane helps me navigate and the glasses... well, some folks get a bit uneasy since I don’t always look where I’m supposed to.”

“Blind? Like, actually blind? You can’t see shit?” The teenager blurted out, his eyes widening with a blend of surprise and curiosity. The vigilante immediately lodged a pen at him to test the claim. It went well past Matt’s head and he made sure to react to it only after it cluttered to the ground. “No way! And you get by with just that cane? Is there some sort of trick to it?” Red Riot seemed weirdly enamored by the concept, had he never met a blind man before? He was right in Matt’s face now, circling him curiously and waving his hand in front of his face, trying to get a reaction. It was a bit overwhelming but Matt stood patiently and just let it happen.

“No trick, I just use it to test the ground before me,” Matt explained. “That way if I feel an obstacle, I can avoid it. It takes a bit of getting used to, though.”

It was then that Karen and Foggy came back, the latter carrying a small stack of case files. They both stammered a bit as they entered, no doubt watching amused by the sight before them. Matt just turned towards them with a silent plea for rescue from this wild vigilante and cake smeared on his face.

“Matt!” Foggy, bless the man, gathered himself first. “So glad you’re here, I need to talk to you about something urgent!” He placed the files on the desk and took Matt by the arm, leading him away toward his office. “You two can have a look at these in the meantime, see if any of them match the description of your friend!”

Once the door was closed firmly behind him, Matt could finally relax. He sat down, still exhausted, but far more awake than he'd been prior, and cleaned the smudge of cake from his

cheek.

"It's him right?" Foggy asked impatiently.

"Foggy..." Matt began, not sure whether to laugh or to cry, "How...?"

"I was pretty sure it was him since he was saying a lot of things that wouldn't make sense otherwise, but I'm glad you recognized him," Foggy shook his head wryly. "I was begging to think we wouldn't find him and then - Bam!" he grinned triumphantly. "It's all thanks to Karen, that woman never gives up! Did you know she's been going to that cafe only because of the homeless shelter nearby?"

"What? Homeless shelter?" Mat asked, confused by what Foggy was saying. "Why was she looking for Red Riot in the first place?"

It was Foggy's turn to pause, "Red Riot? This is... Are you telling me that he is..." he stammered, seeming to run out of both words and breath. "Matt," he said, almost a whisper. "We found Theseus..."

Punz was alone at the bar of the hotel they were staying at. It was overall a nice place, Fisk had made sure the staff kept them well fed and the drinks were free. The mercenary downed the rest of his and the bartender moved to refill it before the burn at the back of his throat had even passed. He could definitely get used to this.

The pleasant buzz he'd felt from these drinks had passed though and his mood had begun to turn sour. This piece couldn't last forever.

Scenes of Dream torturing those villagers earlier flashed through his mind and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to forget them. He didn't know why this bothered him so much, it wasn't like he hadn't killed before, but this... it didn't sit well with him. It was needlessly cruel.

Dream was different after the prison, Punz had tried to wave it away as simple trauma from being tortured by Quackity, but...

That damned god, Punz was sure he had something to do with all of this.

“Is this seat taken?” A voice asked and Punz turned, surprised to see none other than Wilson Fisk standing behind him.

“Suit yourself.” The mercenary said, his words slurring a bit. Had he drunk too many of these?

Fisk sat beside him and flagged the bartender ordering two drinks. He offered one to Punz and the mercenary took it without question. It had a stronger, sharper smell than the ones he’d been drinking. It was just half a cup though.

Punz looked contemplating at the honey-colored drink slushing in his cup and took a swing. He hissed, suppressing a cough as it burned his throat, threatening to come back up.

“First time?” Fisk asked with a bit of amusement. “I guess you don’t have whisky in your world?”

“Nah, we don’t,” Punz said, trying to straighten up a bit so as to hide how dizzy he felt.

“So, you’re a mercenary?” Fisk asked. Was this supposed to be small talk?

“It’s a living,” Punz answered, shrugging nonchalantly.

“Sure, I bet it pays well.” Fisk agreed, ordering them seconds even though Punz hadn’t finished his first drink yet. “What’s your rate?”

“Rate?” Punz asked, confused. This world and its weird words were very annoying at times.

“How much payment do you want per hour of your time?”

“Depends on the job,” Punz said simply, not really liking the direction this conversation was going in. “Why? You want to hire me for something?”

“I could definitely find some work for you if you want. You're a more than capable fighter and you seem loyal.” The man praised him readily. “You won't struggle to find work in this city if you need it.”

“I have work, Dream is paying me to help him with all this.” Punz scoffed.

“Dream, yeah...” Fisk took a long sip of his drink and turned to look Punz in the eye. “Can I be honest with you?”

“Suit yourself.” The mercenary said, unnerved by the intensity of the man's stare.

“I don't buy that whole: ‘I'm just a mercenary who works for whoever pays’ shtick. You're smart, there's no way he's paying you enough for what you're doing.” Fisk said bluntly. “There's more to this than just money isn't there? He's promised you something else?”

“I just like being on the winning side.” Punz tried to deflect, but Fisk didn't let him.

“Are you sure that's going to be his?” He asked. “He doesn't seem... all there, to put it lightly.”

Punz didn't like how the man was echoing his own thoughts from earlier. “He wasn't like that before,” he said, sounding a bit more defensive than he wanted to be. These weird drinks were muddling his mind too much.

“No?” Fisk prodded.

“He had... he is smart, incredibly so. And he knows things... about the world, about how things work. He made it seem like the whole world was at the palm of his hand and he

offered to share.” Punz explained. “And then he made that deal...” he shut his mouth realizing what he’d been about to say. Fisk waited for a beat, but the mercenary refused to continue.

“Hmm, I see. It seemed like a tempting offer then.” Fisk said finally. “But now? Are you sure he can go through with it?”

“Most likely,” Punz said. “He’s still very powerful.”

“Do you still want him to then?” Punz remained silent at that, choosing to take another swing rather than answer. “A leader,” Fisk continued calmly, “Is only as strong as his subordinates. If he’s got you, I’m sure he’ll have a chance at winning, if not...”

Punz stood up at that. He wasn’t drunk enough to not understand what Fisk was asking him, but it was a close thing. He needed to go before he said something stupid.

“If you need a job, let me know,” Fisk said, still calm. “I’m sure we can arrange something that would work for the both of us.”

“I... I’ll think about it,” Punz said simply, he didn’t know what else to say so he focused all his remaining wits on getting to the elevator and pressing the correct button. As soon as the doors closed he slumped back, blindly rummaging through his inventory until he found the bottle he was looking for.

The honey was sickeningly sweet on his tongue, coating his mouth, but clearing his thoughts as it did so.

A ping was heard and the doors opened to the floor he and Dream were staying at. Punz got off and went to find him.

He ran Fisk’s words through his mind again, committing them to memory as close as possible. The man was planning to betray them and he was confident enough to ask Punz to join him. He probably had some sort of plan already, they needed to be careful.

Dream was in their rooms, sitting on a bed with a map of the city in front of him.

“There’s trouble,” Punz said. “Fisk is planning to betray us.”

“He’s of no consequence.” Dream dismissed him with a wave, not even looking up from his map. “We need to find Tommy as soon as possible, then we’ll-“

“He asked me to join him.” Punz interrupted.

Dream looked up at that, the mask tilted slightly to the left. “Did you say yes?”

“I said I’d think about it.”

“Good!” Dream nodded approvingly. “You don’t want to agree too easily or they’ll be suspicious about it. Just keep an eye on them and make sure to ask for a lot of money too, we’ll need some for utilities after we kill him.”

He seemed so calm about it, it pissed Punz off. “Dream, if he asked me it means he has some sort of plan already!”

The mask tilted further, the angle slightly off. Slightly unnatural. “Let them scheme as much as they want, Punz,” he said with amusement, the mask grinning at him. “No matter what they do, I’ll still win.”

Chapter End Notes

Like last time - if you notice any spelling errors or something let me know so I can fix it!

Next chapter will be on Wednesday!

Chapter 11

Chapter by [FightingAgainstTheDawn](#), [Sunfish \(FightingAgainstTheDawn\)](#)

Chapter Notes

Hi guys 🙌

Hope you're all doing great!

A bit late, but hopefully, you won't mind terribly...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“All clear,” Karen said in his earpiece as she finished her scan of the aerie.

Peter nodded and sneaked around the corner, the warehouse that the offworlders were using as a hiding place was just a few meters ahead of him.

He took a deep breath and looked around. He was careful not to get spotted, but there seemed to be no one left on guard. He stayed hidden for a few seconds longer and after not feeling a warning come in from Karen’s sensors or his spidey sense he dashed forward.

Pressed against the wall of the warehouse, he waited with bated breath for another moment, but still, nothing happened.

This was weird, had they left the place unguarded? Or had they left this place already?

He looked carefully through one of the windows on the first floor. They were apparently growing something. Huge caskets of dirt were lined up, with something like wheat and... We’re those potatoes? And what was that weird red mushroom-looking thing?

He was getting distracted, he needed to focus on the mission. There was no sign of the two kids here so maybe they were on the second floor?

Peter jumped and clung to the wall, scaling it skillfully until he got to the first window. He peeked again and ducked back down immediately, almost slipping off the wall, his heart pounding in his chest.

Peter squeezed his eyes shut and cursed his dumb luck. None other than the Blood God himself had been casually sitting at a desk in front of the window, reading a book.

Had he seen him? He’d definitely seen him!

And yet, a minute passed and no reaction came. There was no shouting, no window opened wide, and sharp red eyes staring at him with reprimand, nothing.

Okay, maybe he hadn't blown his cover just yet!

He risked another peak through the window and the offworlder was still there, head resting on his arm with a book in his lap.

With those reading glasses and without the mask he kinda looked more like a young and eccentric professor than a warrior.

Next window then! Peter moved on, still keeping quiet.

He peeked again, more carefully this time, and found them. The two younger offworlders were sitting on the floor and playing some sort of game that involved placing flowers, feathers, and pebbles into a small box. They looked so normal. Without their armor now on they were just two bored teenagers. Well, the horns and the strange white and black skin color of the taller one had ruined the illusion a bit, but they were still far from the scary alien forces here to invade Earth that the news made them out to be.

Peter hesitated. He'd found them, now what? How was he supposed to get them to trust him and come along quietly?

Okay, Mr. Barton prepared you for this! Be calm, non-threatening, and honest!

Here goes nothing, he took a deep breath and knocked on the glass to catch their attention.

The short one, called Tubbo according to Furry, saw him first. The boy had horns that looked much like those of a ram, curving back over his floppy ears messy brown hair, and, what was most disturbing - a jagged burnt scar on the left side of his face.

Apparently, Peter had been worried for nothing because Tubbo just grinned and readily jumped over to open the window for him.

“Hey Spidey, you’re late! What took you so long bossman?” The boy greeted, far louder than Peter would have liked. He got inside quickly and shushed him.

“You knew that I was coming?” Peter asked, panic rising up in him. Had he given himself away somehow? Did the others know too?

“Well, no, but I was hoping something interesting would finally happen!” Tubbo said cheerfully. “We’ve been stuck here for a week ‘setting up base’ and all that bullcrap.” He was talking as if they were friends. As if Peter was the neighborhood friend that often came over to play.

“Okay, so... I’m here to get you two out...” Peter said, removing the mask so they could see his face. He wasn’t that worried about revealing his identity to them, plus they’d seen him without it already. “You don’t have to fight anymore,” he said, repeating the words Mr. Barton had taught him, “I can take you somewhere safe. Somewhere *they* won’t be able to hurt you anymore.” He watched them carefully, trying to show them how sincere he was, hoping they would listen.

“Oh cool! Where are we going then?” Tubbo asked, even louder than before, “Are you taking us to your base? Can you show us around the city too?”

“Wait, we’re going with him?” The other boy intervened. Ranboo, as Mr. Barton had called him, was so tall, taller than Peter, but the way he was hunched down made him feel less intimidating. His body appeared to be split down the middle - half black and half white and he had a long tail with a fluffy tuft at the tip. He too had horns though his were shorter and pointier than Tubbo’s and his mismatched eyes were currently darting between his friend and Peter worriedly.

“Of course we are!” Tubbo said, smacking his friend playfully on the shoulder. “He’s our savior, right?” he asked, looking to Peter for confirmation.

“Yes, I am,” Peter reassured, “but we need to be quiet and quick so they don’t notice us!”

“Tubbo, wait,” the tall offworlder said, a bit more sternly this time. “What are you doing? We need to think this through.”

“Don’t worry so much, I like Spidey, he seems cool,” Tubbo said calmly heading towards Peter, but the other caught his arm. Ranboo was looking at him, anxiety written plainly on his face, but Tubbo just returned his stare sharply.

The mood in the room had suddenly shifted. “They’re not doing anything to save Tommy,” Tubbo accused. “We’ve been here for a full week now and they’ve done nothing. I’m not going to just keep sitting around quietly.”

“That’s... you know we can’t rush this, we need to be careful. Dream could...”

“Oh, fuck your excuses.” The goat boy stomped angrily, and Peter cringed, looking at the door expecting the rest of the offworlders to burst in any second now to see what all the commotion was about. “I’m tired of being cautious, I’m done waiting around. Fuck Dream and fuck the Syndicate! They don’t care about Tommy, I’ll find him myself if I have to.”

“Tubbo...” Ranboo pleaded, his voice ending in a weird miserable sounding warble. “You can’t actually believe that they don’t care... do you?” Tubbo pressed his lips tightly together but didn’t answer. He seemed conflicted, like he wasn’t as sure of his accusations as he’d like to be, so Peter hurriedly intervened.

“We can look for him too,” he offered quickly. “Mr. Stark has lots of technology and the Avengers are really strong! We can help and protect you and your friend!”

Tubbo gave Peter a wry smile like he knew exactly what Peter was doing and was telling him to wait patiently. Then he looked back to Ranboo, his smile was a bit sad but looked much more genuine.

“I can’t keep standing here and doing nothing,” he said quietly. “I did that once already. I’m not... I can’t just let Dream have him a second time.”

Ranboo looked grim as he nodded his agreement.

“Alright,” the tall offworlder sighed. Clearly, Tubbo not only looked like a goat but was just as stubborn as one too. “We’ll need to prepare first though,”

Peter sighed, finally able to relax. They would come with him. Willingly.

“Way ahead of ya bossman!” Tubbo said, grin returning as his bright mood came back full swing and he grabbed Peter's arm and pulled him along. He was far stronger than he looked and Peter stumbled a bit, not even having time to panic before the other boy had dragged him into the next room.

“Techno, we’re being saved!” Tubbo announced gleefully as they strolled in.

Technoblade, for his part, seemed utterly unfazed. He just gave them a flat stare and then continued reading his book. “Sure, just stay out of trouble and don’t get involved in the fight,” he said calmly as if Peter wasn’t even there. “Be sure you have your coms with you, I’ll text when it’s safe to get back or with coordinates if things go sideways.”

“Of course, bossman!” Tubbo said with a mock salute and began rummaging through a chest that was placed next to the wall. “So, Spidey?” he asked, turning to Peter. “Where are we going first? I wanna see the city, we don’t have ones this big where I come from!” He said, rambling as he handed Peter various potions and vegetables to hold.

Peter, meanwhile, was completely out of his mind, standing there frozen and just taking whatever was handed to him, his body reacting on autopilot while his mind was spinning.

What was going on here? He was just standing in the middle of an enemy base, completely visible and no one seemed to care.

Tubbo noticed his panicked expression and gave him a nudge with a sly smile. “No need to be so tense,” he said in a stage whisper. “These guys may look all tough, but they’re just a bunch of nerds. Look, he’s even holding the book upside down!” At that, the offworlder god frowned and righted his book, otherwise not giving any indication he was listening.

“Come on, let's get going!” Tubbo tugged at his arm, but Peter couldn't tear his eyes away from Technoblade.

“Are... are you just gonna let me take them?” He asked bewildered. None of this made any sense to him. “Aren't they hostages or something?”

“Hostages? Why would they be...” Technoblade just shook his head in exasperation. “Look, if it was up to me they wouldn't have been here in the first place, okay? Kids should stay out of wars, you included!” He said sternly.

“Ha! That's rich coming from the guy who took my second life!” Tubbo said bitterly, the words souring the god's expression. “Besides, there's no way in hell we were gonna just let you go save Tommy without us. You guys may have adopted him, but he was our family first!”

“Bruh...” Technoblade sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration.

“Wait, so you're not forcing them to fight?” Peter asked.

“What?” Tubbo asked, outraged at the idea. “The Syndicate can't make me do shit! I chose to be here!”

“Yes,” Technoblade said quietly, putting his book down as Ranboo also came into the room. “I'd have come alone if they'd let me,” he sighed, but then his eyes landed on Peter and hardened. “Your friends are going to attack us soon right? That's why you came here?”

Peter didn't say anything, there was something in that red stare that didn't leave room for lies, but he couldn't tell the truth either. Technoblade just nodded though, taking his silence as an answer.

“Are you plannin’ to lock these two up? Use ‘em against us?”

“No! Of course not! We’re-“

“Then go.” Technoblade interrupted him, uninterested in what else Peter had to say. “Don’t take them to your base though, take them somewhere neutral. I’d rather have them in sight but with the oncoming battle... I trust you’ll keep each other safe through all this.”

This wasn’t what he’d expected to happen when he came here, it was far from it, but Peter found that he didn’t really mind. “Then we don’t have to fight right? I can call Mr Stark right now and we can...”

“Sadly, that’s not how it works.” The pink-haired woman, Niki appeared out of nowhere and Peter flinched, moving out of her way. He hadn’t noticed her approach! Only Miss Natasha had been able to sneak behind him before! “We still need to get Tommy.”

“But, we don’t have him!” Peter protested, “We’ve never even seen him, we...”

“Look, kid, I trust you,” Technoblade said calmly. “You’re probably telling us the truth. As far as you know, that is.”

“No, I-“

“I’m sorry Spidey,” Tubbo said gently. “As soon as we rescue Tommy then the fight will be over, but not before that.”

Meanwhile, Niki crossed the room and stuffed a few extra items into the weird purple box they’d been preparing. “Communicators?” she asked Ranboo, straightening his shirt a bit.

“On us!” He answered readily, a shy smile on his face.

“Weapons and armor?” Niki continued listing.

“Here!”

“Potions, food?”

“In stock!”

“Ok, get on with it then.” She nodded, finally approving their preparations.

“Stay outta trouble!” A voice sounded from above. The winged offworlder - Phil was perched above in the rafters.

Peter startled again and noticed that from where he was Phil had a clear view of the space in front of the warehouse while he was kept hidden. Niki had come from behind where she, no doubt, had a similar view at the back.

They had seen him coming, Peter realized.

They had seen him and let him through. Not only that, but his spider-sense hadn’t registered them as a threat at all.

This was so confusing - these people were supposed to be enemies and yet...

“I shot all the metal bug things that they sent after you,” Phil said casually, “But just to be on the safe side you should teleport away so they don’t see which direction you’re headed.”

Ranboo chittered in agreement, the tall offworlder seemed nervous, his tail swishing behind him. “Let's go then.”

“Wait! Kid,” Technoblade stopped them suddenly and Peter froze.

That was it.

He knew they couldn’t possibly just let him go like that. He’d been trying to calculate how quickly he could grab the two offworlder kids and jump through the window when Technoblade continued, “Are you doing okay?” Peter stared at the man in confusion, his brain struggling to process the question. “Your injuries?”

“I... I’m okay... thanks?”

Idiot! You should have asked for a potion anyway! Mr. Banner could have used it to figure out how to make more of them!

“If you need another health pod ask Tubbo, we’ve got plenty,” Technoblade offered anyway and lifted up his book again, turning to the next page.

“Let’s get on with it then!” Tubbo said as he grabbed a hold of Peter and Ranboo and the world disintegrated around them in a burst of purple particles.

Next thing he knew, Peter was on his knees - his lunch spilling out of him. Tubbo was next to him, patting his back in sympathy.

“Should have warned, sorry about that,” he winced sympathetically. “Got so used to being zoomed around I completely forgot how disorientating it is at first. You gonna be okay bossman?”

“Yeah... no, I’m ok... just...” Peter sat down, trying to get the world to stop spinning around him. “You can teleport?” He asked, looking at the tall teenager.

“Umm yeah...” Ranboo answered sheepishly.

“That’s... that’s awesome.”

“Thanks?” He seemed surprised by the praise. “Are you gonna be okay with another jump?”

“Yeah... I’ll be good just... give me a second...”

Sam stood in the small boxy room that was Al’s kitchen, doing everything he could to keep all four of his hands close to himself so he wouldn’t be in the way as Pamela, or Pam as she had insisted they call her, was making them food.

The house was small and rather dirty, with only one floor and a basement. It had three rooms - Al’s bedroom, a small living room, and the kitchen. The only reason they were staying there was that Sapnap had said it was safe.

“This is where this world’s Angel of Death lives,” he’d told them. “It’s probably the safest place to be.”

Sam had his doubts about that, given that said angel was living in the basement. He had yet to see the man beyond that initial fight, but he doubted he’d be of any help if he lived like this.

Al had refused to share her bedroom, even with Pam, so now all four of them were camping in the living room.

The only reason the experience wasn’t unbearable was that the moment she’d gotten there, Pamela had organized the hunters into cleaning the whole place up. Sapnap had grumbled about being told what to do but, to Sam’s surprise, he’d actually done it. Even George had helped!

There was something about that woman that unnerved the creeper hybrid. The first time he’d seen her she’d been covered in soot and ash, and shaking from the cold or from fear or, quite possibly, from both and yet still she’d come out of her hiding hoping to find Tommy. That made Sam instantly trust her which in turn made her extremely suspicious in his eyes.

She claimed she was Tommy's friend, but they'd separated and she didn't know where he was as well so he wasn't there to confirm her story.

He'd been worried that this might be one of Dream's ploys, but the more he watched Pam the more he was forced to admit that he may have just been paranoid.

Pam was a peculiar human woman, somehow very extraordinary in her mundanity. She had dark eyes and all of her hair was caught in small braids that were tied back so as to not get in her way. She also had a darker skin tone, close to Ponk's now that he thought about it. She had delicate features, though there wasn't anything fragile about her.

She was tall for a human, certainly not as tall as Sam was, but still taller than George. She didn't look like a fighter, but Sam could recognize a survivor when he saw one - lean and wiry in the way that made one think of a wild cat, always on the move and always hungry.

He had begun watching her on the pretext that he still didn't trust her, though now he found himself wandering at this world's technology instead. In many ways they were far more advanced, but in others...

"I don't get it, why are we doing them only two at a time? Can't we just put the whole stack in?" He asked as he watched Pamela move frozen disks of something bread-like onto metal trays before putting them in the oven.

"Well, technically you can," she answered with a bit of amusement in her voice. "But they wouldn't cook well." She explained, showing him the one that was now ready. "If you put them in all at once they won't get crispy around the edges and the dough in the middle would be raw." She cut the 'pitsa' as she was explaining, handing him a slice. "There needs to be enough space between them so they all cook evenly."

He took the small triangle with suspension. It didn't smell off, it wasn't a smell he was familiar with, but it certainly smelled delicious. He watched Pam closely as she took a bite out of hers and after she didn't have an immediate adverse reaction he decided it was probably safe to eat so he took his mouth guard off.

The taste was... weird to say the least, it was bread with bits of meat on top as well as something salty and stretchy that he couldn't name. It was like nothing he'd tasted before, but... it wasn't bad.

"It's not exactly the best pizza out there, it's just what they had discontinued at the frozen aisle, but it's still edible," Pam admitted. "There's this restaurant I know, proper Italian

place, they make their own dough and everything! Now that's good pizza! All their food is super delicious, I would have ordered from them if we had more money."

"It's tasty," Sam admitted. "It's more flavourful than just bread and steak."

Pam looked up at his words and froze, something between fear and wonder written on her face.

She hadn't seen him without the mask before, Sam realized. He lifted the guard back covering the lower half of his face.

"No, no please!" She stopped him hurriedly. "Sorry, I just didn't expect... people don't usually... I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable."

"It's alright," he reassured her but didn't remove his mouthpiece again. "It's unnerving for most people even back where I come from. Creepers are, after all, hostile mobs."

Pam looked at him then in such a way that he could almost have believed she understood his struggles. He dismissed that thought though, it was silly. She was a regular human, there was no reason for others of her kind to be wary of her.

"Can you tell me more about it?" She asked hesitantly, breaking the awkward silence that had begun to settle as they waited for the food to cook. "The world you guys are from? Tommy didn't really tell me much."

"Sure," Sam agreed readily, even if she was a spy there wasn't any information about the server he could give her that Dream didn't already have. "What do you want to know?"

"I guess... What was it like living there?" She asked. "I imagine it's pretty different from here."

“Well, we don’t use this many mods for instance.” Sam started. “Dream is kinda old school like that, wants the server to be plain vanilla and he doesn’t allow us to build big efficient farms or villager trading halls.” He explained. “He doesn’t even let us go to the end.”

“That’s... I don’t get it, what does that mean?”

“Well...” he began, thinking of how best to phrase it. People usually didn’t know much or didn’t really care about the technical stuff, so instead he decided to approach things from a different angle. “Here if you’re hungry you have to go to that closed marketplace and exchange diamonds or some other valuable currency for the items you need, right?” He asked, still fascinated by the system this world had. “Well on our server we don’t really have that yet. Sure, there are shops but... well they tend to get robbed or just give their stock away and nobody really bothers working at them as they do here.”

“How do you get stuff then?” Pam asked.

“You make it yourself.” Sam shrugged, “People build a base, start growing their food, and so on. Usually, you gather materials until you can automate the process and start living more comfortably.”

“That... doesn’t sound all that bad,” Pam said. “Here you can’t even grow your own food.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“You need land,” She said, a bitter smile on her face. “And to buy land you need money. And for that, you need a job. To get a job though they want you to have an address, but to have one...”

You need land,” Sam nodded, realizing the paradox. “Hm... this seems like a very flawed system.”

“Right?” Pam laughed. “What about Tommy? I heard a lot about him and his brothers having a country? At first, I thought he was just making it up, but now...”

“Tommy... Tommy was a weird case. Even when he was the vice president of a country he still lived in his cave, wearing mismatched armor, whatever he could steal or beg from the others really,” Sam couldn’t help but smile fondly at the memory. “And of course, there was L’Mamberg, that’s how they called it. The greatest disaster in the server’s history.”

“Yeah, I heard it got blown up by Dream.” Pam nodded grimly.

“Dream? I mean, I guess technically he started it, but it was Wilbur and then Technoblade who blew it up after.”

“Wilbur?” She looked at him, brows furrowed. “Isn’t he...?”

“The founder of the country?”

“His brother!”

“That too.” Sam confirmed, “Both he and Techno were Tommy’s family.”

“How- Why did they do all that then? Every time I heard him talk about it, it seemed like Tommy really loved that country.”

“Well, Wilbur was a very troubled person. After he lost the election he... well...” Sam shook his head. “And Techno was never really a fan of order and rules. Once it wasn’t his brother who was in charge he just allied himself with Dream and blew it up.”

“Dream? Isn’t he the one who kidnapped Tommy from your world and is currently trying to kill him?” Sam nodded. “That sounds awful...”

Before he could explain further though, the door slammed open, startling everyone.

Within seconds all the hunters had brought out their weapons, ready for a fight.

A man in a red suit, that had clearly seen better days, just strode in, not in the slightest bit worried about the sharp netherite pointing his direction.

“Of course you’re all here,” the man that Sam now recognized as this world’s angel of Death, said with a groan. He threw himself on the couch, dragging mud onto the freshly cleaned floors, and said, matter of factly - “Dream is gunning after your kids, thought you’d like to know.”

“Kids? What kids?” George asked bewildered.

“Ranboo and Tubbo, I believe they were called?”

“Karen?”

“Yes, Peter?” the AI answered readily.

“Initiate the ‘Going Dark Protocol’.”

“Warning, this protocol is unauthorised. If initiated it will prevent me from sendin-”

“Yes, yes. Initiate it anyway, please,” Peter said quickly. He felt a bit guilty for doing this, Mr. Stark would probably worry, but he’d made a promise and he intended to keep it.

He and Ned had created this protocol after they'd bypassed the suit's defenses. It didn't completely remove all the restrictions placed on the suit—he had learned the hard way not to do that. However, it prevented Karen from communicating with Stark Industries, ensuring that she wouldn't disclose his location.

Neutral ground, that's what Technoblade had asked for. The problem was that Peter had no such place. He was just a teenager, after all, he didn't have the resources to make a huge base like Mr. Stark's. There was only one place he could take them to and that was his aunt May's. He didn't really want to involve her in this, he hated when he had to lie to her, but there was no other option.

This part of Queens admittedly wasn't the best, it was rundown and still full of crime despite his best efforts, but he knew it like the back of his hand, it was his home.

He led them through the rooftops, far above the busy streets below. The offworlders looked wary, they probably weren't used to the sounds of car horns and people shouting, but nobody gave them a second glance. People around here were used to seeing him pass through the skylines on occasion and, since they generally didn't want trouble, the moment they saw Spider-Man they knew better than to stick around.

He guided Ranboo as close to his apartment as he dared, then made them stop in one of the back alleys. The repeated jumps had made him very dizzy in the beginning, but by the time they were close, he'd begun to get used to them. Tubbo had told him that the trick was to close your eyes and not look at the purple particles and that had helped more than Peter had thought it would.

He frequently stashed away things here so he quickly located the trash can to which he'd webbed the backpack with his clothes, hidden here for emergencies such as this. He couldn't very well just go home in his Spider-Man costume.

"Ok, here is good!" He said as he cut his backpack free from the bin. "Could you like... stay here? Just for a second! I'll be in this alley I just... I need to change out of the costume." He exclaimed, hurriedly.

"Sure boss man," Tubbo nodded and the two of them turned away to give Peter some privacy. "I don't really understand though, why can't you go in like this? Are people not supposed to know who you are or something?"

"It's complicated," Peter said as he went behind the corner, changing out of his suit and into regular jeans and a T-shirt as quickly as he could. "If my aunt May finds out I'm doing this she's gonna have a meltdown."

“What exactly is ‘this’ that you’re doing?” Ranboo asked, still distrustful.

“I’m a vigilante.” He told them, trying to find the right words to explain as he came out of the alleyway, now fully dressed. “I sorta help people when they need it.”

“Isn’t that a good thing though?” Tubbo asked. “Why are you trying to hide it?”

“Well, it’s not exactly legal...”

“It’s illegal to help people in your world?” Ranboo asked, clearly outraged at the idea.

“No! Not exactly...” Peter took a deep breath. “I’m a vigilante, I’m not officially part of...” he struggled to find the right words. “It’s just that I have these powers and- it’s not like the police can’t do what I do, but I can do it better you know? And why shouldn’t I help when I can? But I’m not *technically* part of the police or really The Avengers, they just call me from time to time when they need me, I guess. Not that I mind! I’d help them anytime!” He added quickly. “But after Mr. Stark found out my age he’s uhh.. he kinda stopped calling me on missions and just told me to stick to the small stuff, which is totally not fair! I can help with so much more than that, right?” He turned to see the offworlders staring at him in confusion. What had he been talking about? Oh, he’d been rambling... and gone off track...

“Point is, only law enforcement should be responsible for catching criminals. And I’m not part of law enforcement.” He said shortly, trying to keep it simple. “But in some cases, the police aren’t capable of dealing with the criminals if they also have powers and there aren’t enough superheroes to help every time so... that’s where I step in,” he continued. “And since I’m breaking the law by helping out with the big stuff anyways, I can’t just sit back and let the smaller stuff happen, you know?”

The two offworlders looked at him, a mixture of surprise and wonder written on their faces.

“Yeah,” Tubbo said, nodding after a bit of thought. “I think I get it.”

"You're caught between doing what's right and following the rules," Ranboo said, his expression distant for a moment, but when he looked back to Peter his eyes were softer. "I can get behind that."

"Saving people, huh?" Tubbo said, smiling at Peter, "I wish we had someone like you back home. We sure could have used some saving." Ranboo looked a bit uncomfortable at Tubbo's words but didn't say anything.

"Anyways... could you um... take the armor off?" Peter asked, wincing a bit as Ranboo tensed, looking as if he was prepared to teleport Tubbo and himself away immediately. "It's just that, my aunt will be a bit freaked out if I just bring two offworlders home! She has no idea about any of this..."

Tubbo gave him a measuring look, but then simply shrugged. "No worries bossman," he said, readily taking the armor off, each piece disappearing into thin air as soon as he let go of it. He gave Ranboo a nudge and the tall offworlder reluctantly followed suit.

To Peter's surprise, they were wearing relatively normal clothes beneath. Tubbo was dressed for the cold—a warm, fluffy jacket and a thick shirt underneath—while Ranboo was wearing a formal suit. Why, Peter had no idea, and he didn't want to ask lest he offended the offworlder.

They went back on the streets and Peter kept his head down, trying to blend in, but the short walk to the apartment was uneventful.

"Hey, Aunt May! I'm home," Peter greeted as they walked inside. "I brought some friends over, can they stay with us for a few days?"

"Oh hello there!" Aunt May smiled, looking up from her crossword puzzle in surprise. "Come in, come in! Make yourself at home." She greeted them warmly, gesturing for them to sit on the couch. "I'll bring some snacks, do you guys want anything to drink? There's soda?"

The two offworlders exchanged a confused look. "Just water is fine," Tubbo said finally, matching May's smile.

“Alright! I’ll be back in a second then.”

Once she was back, bringing a plate of cookies, Peter helping carry the glasses and another bowl with chips, they sat in the living room.

“Now, Peter dear, introduce your friends!” Aunt May prompted.

"These are Tubbo and Ranboo..." Peter said quickly, scrambling to find a plausible excuse. "They're from Europe and... they're here as part of an Erasmus program! They need a place to stay for a few days."

Aunt May looked a bit skeptical, but her smile didn’t slip. "Erasmus program? I don't remember hearing about that."

Peter shifted nervously. His aunt was a completely normal person, without any supernatural as far as he knew, and yet, at moments like this, he could swear she had some sort of supersense that could tell when he was lying. “Yeah, it's a... It was kinda last minute so the school didn’t properly prepare and the two of them don’t have a place to stay..."

“That’s awfully inconsiderate of the school.” Aunt May said, sipping her tea as she watched her nephew, the rim of her cup hiding a knowing smile. "Well regardless, your friends are always welcome here."

"Thanks, Aunt May." Peter breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. “You're the best."

Chapter End Notes

Like always any noticed mistakes or critiques are welcome! Next chapter will be at the end of next week/beginning of the week after.

Did you guys miss Pam?

Chapter 12

Chapter by [Sunfish \(FightingAgainstTheDawn\)](#)

Chapter Notes

Hy guys 🙌

Sorry for the long wait, but... well I kinda lost steam and wasn't happy with how the chapters ended up so I rewrote them... a few times... And then other stuff happened that I'm sure you've heard about.

So regarding the 'Wilbur situation' as people are calling it, first of all - believe victims and support Shelby!

Second, I'm sure that we can all agree that William Gold is a piece of shit and that all the similarities between him and his character Wilbur Soot are superficial at best. For now, I think I'm going to treat William Gold as the shitty actor that plays the character since I can't and don't really want to cut Ghostbur out of the story, though I'll admit that my image of him is very soured. This might change in the future and if you have any thoughts on the matter please share in the comments below.

On a more positive note though - both chapters ended up super long and now there are four chapters instead of two :D

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy was seated behind the huge desk of what he now knew was Matt's office, cake to one side, and a pile of court documents to the other. He hadn't exactly planned for this to happen. Sure, he'd agreed to answer a few questions since they dangled food in front of him and he was desperate, but tagging along to their office? He had no intention of doing that.

Until he found out they were lawyers.

Tommy closed the file he was holding and took the next one from the pile. He looked at the picture briefly and sighed, moving to the next one - it wasn't what he was looking for.

He didn't really know why he wanted to find Josh's file. What did he even hope to find in it?

Perhaps a clue to locating Kingpin or, at the very least, that bitch Liam, but... If he could just catch a last glimpse of the life of the person who'd so quickly become his brother... Maybe it would still be worth all this trouble.

“He might not even have been our client,” Foggy had cautioned earlier. But after a brief but intense discussion with Karen regarding the legality of it all, he relented, allowing Tommy to sift through their firm's case files if it meant that he would follow along.

That had made Tommy instantly suspicious of them. Was this some sort of trap, a ploy to lure him in so they could apprehend him? But...

He wasn't sure why it was exactly, but he doubted these two could pull something like that off.

They looked far too honest. More worried about him than malicious. It stung his pride a bit—did he really look that pitiful? But on the other... maybe he was. Dirty and starving as he was, maybe he did need a bit of help.

“Could this be it?” He glanced up at Karen, who was seated on the other side of the desk, also perusing files. “Josh Adams,” she read out loud, “male, 17 years old, on trial for drug possession and distribution.”

She handed Tommy the first page of the report where the personal information was written. He took it and almost stopped breathing once he saw the picture.

It was Josh.

A younger, more beaten-up version of him at least. He was glaring straight at the camera, eyes filled with resentment and hatred. He looked malnourished, dark circles under sunken eyes. Tommy's gut churned, 17 years old. That's how old Josh was in that picture. Just a single year older than Tommy.

“Yeah,” he managed to say, his voice strained as he forced the words past the lump in his throat, “That's him.”

“This case is from a few years ago,” Karen continued, summarizing the information from the file. “He was a repeat offender, which led to a harsher sentence—five years in prison. However, he was released three years later for good behavior. Instead, they gave him 12

months probation, enrollment in a drug treatment program, mandatory counseling sessions, and 300 hours of community service.” He listened as Karen recounted the details of the case, her words a distant buzz in his ears, their meaning lost to him.

She handed him the rest of the file and Tommy took it. He didn’t really understand half the words written there, but one line caught his attention above the rest.

*Family Status : The defendant is an **orphan** with no known legal guardians or parents.*

“What happened to him? Do you know?” His voice sounded calm, but his hands were shaking. He had questions, so many questions, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask any of them.

“Well, I’m just a secretary, but my other friend, the one you met earlier? Matt? He’s the one who worked on that case. He made sure that Josh got a fair trial,” Karen explained gently. “I think he should know more about it, so you can ask him if you want.”

Tommy nodded and took a deep breath, pulling himself together. He was an expert at burying unpleasant feelings after all, so he took the shovel and got to work.

“Is he your friend?” Karen asked tentatively.

“He’s dead,” Tommy said bluntly and stuffed his face with cake again.

“Oh, I didn’t know... I’m so sorry...”

“Why? You weren’t the one to kill him, were you?” Tommy deflected expertly. “Plus, I only knew him for a short while, it’s not like I knew him that well really...” As soon as those words were out of his mouth his throat closed, almost choking him. The realization hit him like a tidal wave. He really hadn’t known Josh.

Thankfully the door opened then, the other two choosing that moment to come back in, distracting Karen so she wouldn't notice Tommy's expression.

Okay, deep breaths, just like Techno taught you.

He concentrated on his breathing. Then on the taste of cake on his tongue, far sweeter than anything he'd eaten before, and finally on the two newcomers.

Matt and Foggy, for their part, looked a bit troubled, pale as if they'd seen a ghost or some shit.

"You alright mate?" Tommy asked through another mouthful of cake.

"Sorry?" Matt stumbled a bit, thrown off by the sudden question.

"Are you alright?" Tommy repeated, almost shouting the words as if Matt had gone deaf as well as blind. "Seem a bit pale, is all."

"Yeah, no, I'm... alright, just... didn't get breakfast I guess."

"Yeah... Sorry about that."

"...What?"

"I was bribed with your sandwich," Tommy confessed. "Your friends said you're annoying so I could have it." After a bit of thought, he offered reluctantly, "You can have a bit of my cake. Just a slice though!" He had decided he liked the guy on account of him being nice to Josh so he could share a bit of the cake. It wasn't like he was even that hungry anymore - he'd eaten about half of it plus the aforementioned sandwich already.

"Cake?" Matt asked, eyebrows raised. "Did I forget someone's birthday? Why is there a cake?"

Karen and Foggy exchanged glances, Karen's laughter bubbling up while Foggy scratched the back of his head.

Tommy, in the meantime, used the fact that only a blind man was looking his way to snatch Josh's file into his inventory. Come to think of it, maybe it was his birthday.

"Well, you see," Foggy began cautiously, "we sort of promised him cake if he tagged along with us."

"Okay, but... A whole cake?" Matt asked.

"I was promised cake, not a slice of it!" Tommy chimed in. "You can't short me, king. I ain't doing shit for free."

"A lawyer in the making," Karen proclaimed with a proud grin, wiping away tears of amusement.

"So let me get this straight," Matt said, "You lured a kid in here... with sweets..."

"Well... when you put it like that..." Foggy fumbled and Tommy snorted.

These three were surprisingly fun. Plus, so far, they hadn't attacked him or made him feel unsafe. In fact, they'd put up with his bullcrap far more than most usually did.

Maybe it hadn't been such a bad decision to come here.

It took a lot of convincing to get the two offworlders to keep their armor off and wear civilian clothes, but once that was done they could almost pass for regular people.

Ranboo still stuck out with his two-toned skin and mismatched eyes, but in this day and age, it wasn't that uncommon to see a mutant walking out in the open, especially in New York. They still got a few stares as they walked towards the subway, but people generally left them alone.

Tubbo fortunately only needed to ditch his jacket since it was too warm for the weather. Underneath, he wore just a plain green T-shirt and jeans, which was great since he was way too small to fit into any of Peter's clothes.

Ranboo on the other hand was more difficult. Peter's jeans didn't match his height precisely, but they fit him well in every other aspect. The way the offworlder had cuffed them above his ankles, however, made it look more like an aesthetic choice rather than a necessity. Ranboo had also managed to dig out one of Peter's old shirts - a short-sleeved, Hawaiian print one that he'd have thrown away if it wasn't a gift from Aunt May. He wore it open over a plain black T-shirt and coupled with his sunglasses he really could pass for a foreign exchange student. Oddly enough, this look suited him far better than the strange businessman suit he'd been wearing before. Peter shook his head. The more he learned about that other world, the more it confused him.

"So..." Ranboo said, talking as they made their way towards Midtown High. "Your name is Peter Parker, but you wear that weird skin when you go to fight crime and you call yourself Spider-Man... So people don't find out that it's actually you?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Peter nodded. It had proven very hard to explain the concept of vigilantism to the offworlders. Apparently, their political system, though faintly similar, was far more flexible in terms of what was legal and what wasn't.

"Why are the authorities trying to catch you though?" Ranboo asked, still perplexed. "Aren't you helping them?"

“I am! But... Well, when we fight there’s usually some collateral damage and stuff...” Peter tried to explain. “There’s this newspaper guy who says I’m just a menace to society...”

“Nah, boss man!” Tubbo exclaimed. “You’re a hero!”

“That’s- Thanks...” Peter said awkwardly. It wasn’t exactly true, he couldn’t hold a candle to Mr Stark or Captain America, but he did help a lot of people regardless, so maybe...

“Don’t be like that!” A familiar voice called from behind them, causing the offworlders to jump again. Peter could swear he saw the flash of a sword and then an axe passing through Tubbo's right hand, there for a second and then gone again. Ned, who was completely oblivious to all that, just continued approaching with an easy smile on his face. “You’ll inflate his ego too much!” He grabbed Ranboo’s hand to shake it, jolting the entire offworlder up and down as he did so. “Pleasure to meet you guys, I’m Ned, Peter’s guy in the chair.”

“I’m Ranboo,” the offworlder introduced himself in turn, “...And I’m... not in a chair?”

“What planet are you from? How did you get here?” Ned asked excitedly, shooting question after question without giving anyone a chance to respond. “Are you here to take over our planet? Are you planning on ruling us or just drain our natural resources? I read that-”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Peter finally intervened, “They’re not aliens, Ned, they’re offworlders,” he whispered to his friend. “They come from a different reality, not a different planet!”

“That’s... so much more awesome!” his friend said, his excitement growing.

“We’re looking for a friend of ours,” Tubbo spoke up before Ned could go on another tangent. “Tommy, do you know him?”

“I mean, I know *two* Tommies! One’s Timothy from Algebra and I have a Thomas in my English class, but...” Ned looked at Peter with confusion. “Does he have a family name or

something?"

"Innit," Ranboo provided.

"No, sorry. Haven't met him." Ned said apologetically.

"We should, um... get going," Peter suggested. "Ned, you have what I asked for?"

"Sure," Ned scoffed, before adding. "Next time you need fake passes though, a bit more time to make them would be very appreciated."

"Sorry, it was kind of an emergency." He took the two passes, looking them over closely. "Um, Ned? One of them is for a girl..."

"I know," Ned said. "It's a testament to my greatness that I managed to produce two to begin with! This is all I had to work with though. They're from the two Erasmus students from last year. I changed the dates so they'd be valid, but you didn't really give me names or photos to work with, so what did you expect?"

"Right... Let's hope no one looks at them too hard then." Peter sighed, handing the cards to the offworlders. To his relief, Ranboo took the female pass without much protest or hesitation.

"Alright, let's go then!" Ned said excitedly, leading the way.

The guard at the gate thankfully knew Peter and Ned, as part of the Decathlon team they were often at the school library even on weekends, so when they said they were touring this year's Erasmus students the guard just laughed and wished them a good time.

They quickly found their way to the robotics lab. Peter knew the club's schedule well and had used that knowledge fully in the past when he'd had to make his own equipment. It was a

good thing that Midtown High wasn't stingy with its resources.

"You mean you know that scary-looking guy that was on the news? The one with the wicked-looking skull mask?" Ned kept asking, trying to make a scary face to mimic the mask.

"Yeah, his name is Technoblade," Tubbo said and leaned in conspiratorially. "He's actually a huge nerd once you get to know him. If you don't believe me just ask him about potatoes, he can talk your ears off!"

Ned laughed. "Man, I can't believe you guys fought with the Avengers! It was so cool, but it was probably pretty scary too! I'm so glad things got resolved."

"Well..." Peter faltered as he moved through the benches, grabbing whatever equipment he figured they'd need. "We're still working on that part..."

"Wait," Ned asked suddenly worried, "Please tell me we're not working with the bad guys!" he whispered hurriedly, but it was still loud enough for the offworlders to hear.

"No! It's all a misunderstanding!" Peter assured him. "We just need to find a way to prove it, that's all!"

"Why are you even fighting though?" Ned asked, turning to the offworlders. "You said you didn't want to conquer us or anything!"

"Cause you won't give us Tommy back," Tubbo shrugged as if it was supposed to be obvious.

"Because we don't have him," Peter repeated again.

"You don't, but Dream does," Tubbo insisted.

“But we don’t know Dream!” Peter said exasperatedly. They’d had this argument already, but Tubbo didn’t seem to want to listen.

“What dream?” Ned asked, unable to follow the conversation.

The goatlike offworlder rolled his eyes and looked to Ranboo. “Show them *that*,” he said finally.

Ranboo nodded grimly and began rummaging in the empty air in front of him before pulling out a book. It was a plain, brown letter booklet, *Do Not Read* written on the cover in bold letters. He opened it carefully on the first page and turned it towards them.

Ned and Peter looked at it carefully.

“Is that a glyph of some sort? It looks like an emoji...” Ned asked.

“There’s just a smiley face drawn on it...” Peter confirmed, just as confused by what was happening.

Tubbo’s brows knit together, he seemed troubled as he pulled his friend aside.

“They’re not reacting and don’t seem to know who Dream is,” Tubbo whispered, but it was loud enough that Peter could still hear him. “Does that mean they’ve never met him?”

“I don’t know...” Ranboo just shrugged. “I could remember Dream even when I couldn’t remember my own name. Maybe they’re not brainwashed?”

“We’re not!” Peter confirmed. He’d know if he was brainwashed. Right?

“Well... Maybe you’re not, but your other friends are!” Tubbo said with certainty.

“Wh- How... Why do you think they are?” Ned asked, still trying to understand what was going on.

“They were waiting for us at the portal!” Tubbo said sharply.

“Of course they were! You were attacking us!” Peter defended.

“How did they know where the portal would be if Dream didn’t tell them, though?” Ranboo asked.

“The portal was there for a while, at least a day before you guys came through!” Peter told them.

The two offworlders exchanged looks again, seeming far less certain than before.

“That... doesn’t actually prove anything!” Tubbo insisted.

“What would prove it then?” Ned asked.

“I... don’t know...” the short offworlder said, his shoulders drooping. He sighed and took Peter by the shoulder, giving him an apologetic glance. “Look, it’s not your friend’s fault, Dream does that! He manipulates and controls people without them even realizing it!”

“What if they aren’t brainwashed though?” Ned asked thoughtfully. “What if no one is and that was that guy’s plan all along? To pit you against each other?”

“That’s...” Tubbo faltered at that, the concern on his face growing.

“That actually sounds like something he would do,” Ranboo admitted tentatively.

“That’s why we’re here though, right?” Peter asked, bringing them back on track. “If we can find Tommy then we won’t need to fight anymore. Simple as that.”

Ned nodded, “Alright then. How do we find him?”

“With this,” Tubbo said, taking the small device he had on his wrist off and placing it on the table before them.

Ned looked at it critically, turning it over in his hands a few times. It had a small keyboard and a screen.

“What’s that?” He asked finally, unable to determine its function on his own.

“It’s a communicator,” Ranboo said, pulling his sleeve to show his, and then typing something on it. The device in Ned’s hands gave a small beep, a line of text appearing on the little screen.

<Ranboo> hi, it’s me.

“We use it to communicate throughout the server,” Tubbo explained. “We tried contacting Tommy that way when we came here, but he didn’t answer and... we don’t really know if that’s because he can’t for some reason or...”

“Or?” Peter prompted gently when the silence grew too long.

“We... didn’t exactly leave on good terms last time we spoke to him,” Ranboo admitted, his eyes locked down on his hands.

“Theoretically we should be able to track his location regardless though,” Tubbo said. “We just need to access the Code.”

“Alright, now you’re speaking my language! That’s something I can do!” Ned said excitedly before turning it over in his hands a few more times. “Where’s the port?”

“Ned, they’re from a different reality,” Peter said calmly, reminding his friend of the situation. “Their technology probably works differently.”

“Right, okay...” Ned said, his brows furrowing in thought, but he clearly wasn’t giving up. “First let’s grab a few books and then I’ll figure it out!”

Half an hour later they were back in the robotics lab, all sorts of mechanical parts strewn around them as Tubbo and Ned were pouring over a book - carefully comparing the diagram in it to the communicator they had disassembled.

“Redstone is facilitating!” Ned said, carefully making a line using the red dust like Tubbo had shown. “It’s a bit like electricity, but it doesn’t behave like anything in our world!”

The two of them had immediately hit it off, their shared love of science making both of them so excited that they had stopped speaking English entirely, using technical terms and mechanical speak that sounded almost like gibberish Instead.

Peter and Ranboo had wisely stepped back, giving the two mad scientists space to work. The offworlder was playing with a locket and Peter couldn’t help but glance over. It looked like a painting of the two of them and a third, smaller kid.

“Oh, is that Tommy?”

Ranboo barked out a laugh at that, “No, no, that's- that's our son, Michele,” he said, his smile growing fond as his thumb went over the portrait.

“Wait... Your son?” Peter’s mind stalled, “You have a kid? Are you two married? How old are you???” He’d thought that Tubbo and Ranboo were around his age, but maybe it worked differently in their world or something?

“I- Well, I’m 17, and Tubbo’s close to 18, but... well, it just sort of happened...” Ranboo explained somewhat awkwardly. “We found Michele and... Well, things just fell into place.”

Peter had so many more questions, but just as he'd been about to ask the hairs on the back of his neck rose, his spidey senses warning him that someone was coming.

Oh no...

Peter jumped to the door and opened it quickly, startling MJ who had been just reaching for the handle herself.

“MJ! Hi!” Peter exclaimed with exaggerated cheer, using his body to block the view inside the room. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” she deadpanned and tried to push past him, but Peter didn’t move out of the way.

“The professor isn’t here right now,” he said hurriedly.

“I know. I was passing by and saw the lights were on so I was curious to see what was going on since there shouldn’t be a class going on now,” She said calmly, trying to peek behind him. “Care to explain what you’re doing? Last I heard you quit the robotics club.”

“Well, I...” Peter stammered, struggling to come up with a believable lie. How was he supposed to explain all this without revealing his secret identity?! “I was just showing the new Erasmus students around! The professor asked me to show them the lab as well!”

“Erasmus students? Weren’t they supposed to come two months from now?” She said, giving him a critical look as she saw right through his bullshit. “What’re you actually doing, Parker?”

“We’re saving the world!” Ned chimed in from behind him. “It’s a secret though, so please don’t rat us out?”

MJ squinted her eyes at them both, “Sure. But you have to let me join.”

“Deal!” Ned agreed immediately, not giving Peter a chance to argue.

“So?” She asked, pushing past Peter to have a look at the disassembled offworlder device on the table. “What’s all this then?”

“It’s a communication device,” Ned explained. “We’ve managed to tweak it a bit, if this works we’ll be able to hook it up to the computer and take a look at its code.”

“Where’d you get it from?” MJ asked as she looked closer at the Redstone mechanism. “Is this alien tech? Are these guys aliens?!” She turned to Tubbo and Ranboo in amazement. “Are you here to invade us?”

“We aren’t, but the guy who took our friend is,” Tubbo said grimly. “We’re trying to stop him.”

MJ nodded, satisfied with the answer. “What are we doing then?”

Peter gaped at her. That was it? No more questions? She was just going to help them like that?

Ned on the other side, just grinned and scooted over to make room for her, giving the short offworlder a nod as he did so. "MJ is wicked smart," he told him. "She's the captain of the Academic Decathlon Team."

Tubbo nodded and turned back to the project. They finished the wiring and the offworlder grinned. "Alright, let's hope this doesn't blow up in our faces!" He said as he connected the communicator to the makeshift port the two had constructed.

They all waited silently as the computer was processing, Peter holding the fire extinguisher just in case the wiring caught on fire.

Then a screen popped up - an unfamiliar purple script scrolling on it.

"We're in!" Ned announced with barely contained excitement and they all gathered around the monitor.

"This..." Tubbo watched in amazement as the words scrolled down the screen, seemingly endless. Unbelievable. "This is *Code* !" He said almost breathlessly. The essence of their entire world, written out before his eyes. Only Admins and Gods ever got to see this! "This is it! This is everything!" he exclaimed, unable to restrain his excitement anymore. "If we can figure out how this works we can figure out everything! We can do anything!"

They all stared at him as if he'd grown a second head or something, but all Tubbo could think about right now were the possibilities. With this, with the Code right in front of him... they didn't need to go back to the Dream SMP anymore. Fuck, they could make their own place, their own server...

Ran put a hand on his shoulder then, the gentle squeeze grounding him and bringing him back to the task at hand. He could think of the new world he'd create for them once they'd

rescued Tommy. First, though, they needed to understand how to use the Code. He scooted over a bit so the rest could have a look as well.

“Can you read it? What language is this?” MJ asked. “It doesn’t look like Chinese or Japanese... maybe a stylized version of ancient Greek?”

“It’s Enchanter script!” Ranboo said with equal amazement and then explained as he saw the questioning looks from the others. “It’s a dead language that the people of before spoke. I know a bit, but... We’ll need Phil, he’s old, he definitely knows how to read it!”

“We don’t have time to get Phil,” Tubbo shook his head. “Can I have a book and quill? Between the two of us, we should be able to translate most of it.”

“How would we use it though? Does it just say where Tommy is?” Peter asked as he handed Tubbo a book with the whitest paper he’d ever seen and a stick. It took the goat hybrid a second to figure it out, but apparently, the pointy bit had infinite ink. Neat.

“Yes, well technically but...” without thinking he pulled out his sword from his inventory, the action making the others jump back a bit, but Tubbo only placed it on the table in front of them and pointed to the enchantments along the blade. “Words written in the old language hold power. In our world, we use carvings such as these and a bit of lapse to give our weapons and armor different attributes like sharpness and knockback or protection and fire resistance, but not all words will work,” he explained and put the weapon away. “You have to know the right ones and even then there are some enchantments that don’t work together. You can’t put Fortune and Silk Touch on the same pickaxe for example.”

“Why not?”

“Just doesn’t work,” Tubbo answered simply. “I’m not an admin, so I don’t know what they are, but I know that there are certain phrases called Commands. Like, you say ‘*Give me a sword*’ for instance, and BAM! There’s a sword in your hand!”

“Okay, that’s cool and all, but how would it help us find your friend?” MJ asked.

“The Code governs the rules of reality,” Tubbo said and grinned as he saw MJ’s expression, shock and comprehension written on her face. He’d decided he liked her despite how much her deadpan reminded him of Technoblade, she caught on quick. “If we can decipher this, we’ll be able to just write the Command and get Dream’s coordinates! Or better yet - we could just teleport Tommy directly to us!” he said triumphantly, letting his words sink in fully.

Before they could say anything else though something in Ned’s pockets rang loudly, startling them all. Ned fumbled, searching through his pockets to produce a device of some sort.

“Um... guys?” He said as he read the warning message that had appeared on his hand-held communicator device. “I don’t want to panic anyone, but...” Ned turned it towards them. “Are these your friends?”

‘Avengers Level Threat’ it read on the small screen. Bellow it there was a shaky moving image of Techno, Phil, and Niki fighting. Tubbo was relieved to see them a bit banged up, but still alive. They appeared to be pretty evenly matched for now, but he knew that wasn’t going to last long.

“We’re running out of time,” Ranboo said beside him. “We need to hurry!”

Wade hadn’t spent more than an hour at his home since the offworlders took it over.

Worst part was Al liked the sorry bunch, the old crone finally had someone to boss around. On one hand, the house had never been cleaner, on the other the hunters hadn’t stopped with their puppy dog eyes, begging for his help. At least that stupid goddess of theirs had taken the hint and left him alone. That or the stunt she’d pulled had left her too weak to bother him further.

Either way, he enjoyed the piece and quiet. Inside his mind at least. Outside of it...

“Where are we going now?” the annoying ghost asked again, trailing after him. “Are you just gonna sit alone in an abandoned building and cry again?”

Wade sighed and continued moving stealthily through the backstreets of Hell's Kitchen, not bothering to give an answer.

The meeting point wasn't that far away now.

A siren wailed in the distance as he stepped onto the dim street, the few street lamps still standing were flickering and casting long uneven shadows.

A few teenagers scattered as they saw him, spray paints forgotten as they ran away in a hurry. When people saw a red suit in this neighborhood they didn't wait to see who it was exactly.

"This way, sir," a man called to him from the shadows of one of the buildings. It was none other than Wesley Welch, Kingpin's favorite minion. The guy had all the charm of a brick wall and the personality of a filing cabinet, but gods damned if he wasn't creepy as hell when he wanted to be.

"I don't like this guy," Ghostbur whined but didn't stop following along. He was getting more and more restless, more and more inhuman as time went by. His eyes were deep hollows, blue blood spilling from his open chest. Wade would be worried if he actually cared. Which he didn't.

Wesley had already entered the building so Wade hurriedly followed along, climbing the narrow steps up to the dinghy bar on the second floor.

"Le Paradis perdu," the ghost read out in broken French, the words weird in his mouth. It was the name written in neon above the bar, though now only a few of the letters were still glowing.

Wade smirked; it truly was a lost paradise. The place had probably once been a fairly nice piano bar, likely not entirely legal during the prohibition era, but its days of glory had long since passed. Now it stayed in business only because Kingpin kept it running, moving product through it and hosting meetings with people who were important but not suitable for daylight encounters. People like Deadpool.

"He's waiting for you," Wesley said, adding a 'sir' at the end almost as an afterthought.

"Well, well, well," Deadpool drawled as he approached the designated table. "The Kingpin himself. Never thought I'd get the pleasure."

"Deadpool," Wilson Fisk greeted him back. "Please, take a seat," he said, pointing at the seat in front.

The bar wasn't empty, far from it. Thugs mulled about, trying to blend in as casual patrons while keeping a watchful eye. They weren't close enough to eavesdrop, that was interesting. Fisk wasn't usually this bashful about his business. Wade had a bad feeling about all this, but his curiosity got the better of him and he'd agreed to the meeting. He was itching to know what Kingpin wanted, but that didn't mean he'd play ball.

“Gotta ask, boss, does the white suit come with cleaning insurance? Or do you just buy a new one when the old gets too blood-stained?”

“Not all of us can look good in red,” Fisk joked, but his smile quickly faded. “I have a favor to ask of you.”

“A favor? Not a job? I didn’t know we were this close!” Deadpool said, feigning coyness. “I don’t do favors though, not unless there’s something in it for me.”

“You mercenaries and your incessant need to pretend that it’s all about the money,” Fisk shook his head. “If you do this for me you’ll have all my resources at your disposal. Next time you need something, it’s yours.”

Deadpool paused at that. He’d have been fine with a set amount, but to be handed a blank check like this... Kingpin must be desperate. “What do you need then, boss?”

“You were at the gathering I hosted, were you not?” Kingpin inquired. “You met my new... ‘associate’?”

“I did,” Deadpool replied, smirking. “Nice guy, would put him in the ground if given the opportunity.”

Fisk chuckled at that. “You’ll have to get in line. But for now, all I want you to do is put me in contact with Daredevil.”

“Daredevil? Don’t you have him on speed dial? I was under the impression that you just needed to step outside, and he’d be there.”

“Sadly, that’s not the case. Plus, the meeting needs to be arranged discreetly. Someplace neutral. The fewer people that know about it, the better.” Fisk’s tone was grave. “Will you do it?”

“I’ll admit, you have me intrigued. What do you need him for?”

“I believe we have a common enemy,” Fisk said grimly. “One I don’t think we could fight on our own.”

“Must be one hell of a guy to make the two of you work together.”

“He sure is!” Kingpin laughed then, but the laughter never reached his eyes. He looked at Wade then, “I’m afraid, Deadpool,” he said seriously. “I’m afraid that he will destroy this city and the world with it. And I’m scared that even with Daredevil on our side we won’t be enough to stop him.”

Hi guys, I just wanted to say that your comments give me life and keep me going! I'm not really sure how to end this story, that's partially why it's taking me so long to write it, plus I'm constantly fighting the urge to rewrite the whole thing :D
But I'm too far in to give up now! I'll do my best to finish this story in a satisfying(to the best of my abilities) manner, I just can't promise you *when* it will be done.

Thanks for your patience and support – it means the world to me!

Chapter 13

Chapter by [Sunfish \(FightingAgainstTheDawn\)](#)

Chapter Notes

This part probably took me the longest to figure out...

It's the long-awaited fight between the Syndicate and the Avengers so I really wanted to do it justice or else I just knew that Karma was gonna complain :D

Hope it lives up to the hype!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Matt sat down heavily on his couch and pretended not to pay attention to the teenager from another world who was in the process of turning his whole apartment upside down.

Currently, the kid was rummaging through Matt's kitchen, opening every cupboard, looking through each drawer, and all the while asking Matt to explain the concept of noodles to him. There was a certain endearing quality to the chaos, but it would have been more charming if the kid wasn't so clearly scrounging every bit of food he could get his hands on like an anxious squirrel before winter.

Tommy was a good kid, he was smart and curious and never stopped talking, but life on the street had clearly left its mark on him. He was jumpy and very mistrusting, always careful to keep Matt in his line of sight.

Done with the kitchen, Tommy moved on to the living room. Matt didn't have a TV, but the kid found the radio and started playing around with it. After aggressively switching through a bunch of stations he landed on one playing some kind of indie rock and left it on.

Satisfied with the music Tommy turned and threw a pen at him. Matt let it fly, careful to react to it only after it had landed on the sofa beside him, making a noise. He made a show of searching for it with his hand before he set it back on the coffee table. Tommy for his part, just continued humming off-tune and waving around Matt's walking cane as if nothing had happened.

The kid briefly rummaged through the library, but Matt had only a few books that weren't in brail so he left it alone and moved on to the windows, casually waving a hand in front of Matt's face as he went by him.

Matt sighed internally, but let these little tests fly. None of what Tommy had done so far had been aimed to hurt him or break anything, but it was clear the kid didn't trust him fully yet. He systematically went through the entire apartment, only sparing Matt's bedroom. Matt thanked God for that, he wasn't quite sure what would've happened if Tommy had found his Daredevil costume.

He wondered what Tommy's life must have been to make him like this. Was he on his own in that other world as well?

Matt still couldn't wrap his head around the fact that the boy the offworlders were currently tearing through the city to find, was the same one that Karen and Foggy had fished out of a dumpster. He could believe even less that the same kid had turned out to be the new vigilante Red Riot.

And for some reason that kid hated Daredevil.

"What did you even do to him?" Foggy had asked after the two of them had finally realized the situation they had found themselves in.

"I don't know! I don't even think I've met him without the mask before today!" Matt said desperately.

"Could it have something to do with Josh?"

"Josh?" The name rang a bell, but... had Red mentioned him? Wait... It was coming back to him now. That night in the alleyway, fighting with the vigilante... the brother he'd mentioned he'd lost...

"He was our client apparently," Foggy explained. "We worked on his case a few years back. I remember I was wondering back then why you insisted on taking such a difficult case, but well... It had something to do with you being Daredevil, right?"

“I think I remember him, a young kid, he must have been around Tommy’s age back then, worked for Kingpin...” Matt said tentatively, trying to remember all the details. “He cooperated with me after I caught him though. He was a good kid, life had just dealt him a pretty rough hand.” But wasn’t Josh from their world? “How do you think they knew each other?”

“I don’t know... Could Kingpin be involved in all of this? Maybe he fed the kid some lies about you?”

“I don’t like to think that Josh went back to him. Plus, Red seemed adamant about killing Kingpin.”

Karen walked in then, closing the door to Matt’s office softly behind her. She’d been staying with Tommy until now since they hadn’t wanted to overwhelm him, but by the sound of his breathing from the other room, Matt could tell the kid had fallen asleep.

“How is he?” Foggy asked.

“Tired,” Karen said with a sigh. “He fell asleep on the couch. That’s the child we were looking for right? Tommy has to be a nickname for Theseus right?”

“Yes, that’s him, but make sure you only call him by his nickname,” Matt warned her, “We don’t want to spook him by showing that we’ve been looking for him.”

Karen nodded, but there was still tension in her shoulders. “Matt, what is going on? Who is he? Why are people after him?”

“I don’t really know much - a lot of people are searching for him,” Matt admitted, “But we can’t figure out who are the ones that want to protect him and who are the ones who mean him harm.”

“You’re not telling me the full story,” she insisted.

“I-I can’t...” Matt hesitated. “I’m sorry, it’s just... It’s complicated...”

Karen sighed at those words and Matt’s stomach dropped, he could feel the disappointment in her, the tiredness in her stance. He’d used that excuse a lot recently, hadn’t he?

She looked to Foggy then, but he just shifted uncomfortably, avoiding her gaze.

“Okay,” Karen said, but her tone was flat. She was angry with them. “I see it’s boys club night again. I did all this work to help you, but in the end, you still want to keep me out.” With a decisive turn, she added, “Well, since I’m clearly not needed here.”

“Karen-” Mat tried to catch her arm, but she avoided him. “Wait a second, please...”

“It’s just, when will you stop coddling me like some helpless damsel?”

“I know, It’s just-”

“Dangerous? I know Matt, I can make my own choices though!” she waited for a beat, giving him a chance to say something, anything. But Matt couldn’t bring himself to speak. “Then you can take care of Tommy on your own,” she said firmly and left, closing the door firmly behind her, leaving Matt and Foggy in an uneasy silence.

Foggy gave him a look and Matt didn’t need to see to know the disappointment in it. He hated himself for letting her leave like that, but it was better she be mad at him than tangled up in this mess because of him.

“So, you’re telling me, this guy’s entire job is to bring food to people?” Tommy asked after Matt closed the door on the delivery guy.

Matt, for his part, just nodded like this was an entirely normal question to ask, “Yeah, it’s a whole business.” The kid had been amazed to discover that Matt was rich enough to eat out almost every day of the week, though for Matt that was more out of necessity than anything since he couldn’t cook.

“But, how can you be sure he won’t just eat it on the way?”

“It’s his job, he won’t get paid if he eats it.”

“Yeah, but he’d still have eaten the pizza,” Tommy argued back, seemingly thinking that that was the most important part.

They both sat down at the kitchen table. Matt had gotten two large pizzas for them. Tommy’s had so many toppings on it that most Italians would argue that it could no longer be called pizza, while Matt had ordered something simpler with mostly cheese and vegetables. The teen had made fun of him for it, but after inhaling his whole pizza in less than a minute the kid was now eyeing it with newfound interest. Amused Matt sat still, trying not to laugh as the kid reached out across the table, trying and failing to discreetly sneak a slice off his plate.

“You can have some of mine if you want,” he offered finally after Tommy seemingly gave up.

“Nah, not really hungry anymore,” Tommy deflected, but the way he was fidgeting in his seat said otherwise.

“You sure? It’s really good,” he assured, but the kid just shook his head again. “I’m full though, and it would be a shame for it to go to waste,” Matt said and Tommy finally gave in and took a slice.

“Okay, It's actually pretty good,” the teenager admitted reluctantly and Matt pushed the plate towards him, making a note to stock up the fridge a bit better tomorrow. The kid was far too thin, he needed to eat properly to fill up that beanstalk frame of his.

After they were done eating and Tommy helped clear the dishes it was time to go to bed though Matt had a feeling this night wasn't over. A feeling that was confirmed not even an hour later when the latch of the guest room window clicked and Tommy went out into the night.

Matt sighed and got up, pulling his costume on as quickly as possible, but once out he couldn't find which direction the young vigilante had gone in. He wasn't up on the rooftops, Matt concentrated harder, trying to discern the kid's footsteps from the still-busy street below, but-

“Oh, you look extra dark and brooding tonight sweetheart!” Deadpool chimed in from behind him and Matt turned slowly to him, already annoyed at the mercenary's presence. He'd tried contacting Deadpool multiple times to no avail, but of course, he'd choose to show up now when he was least wanted.

“Ah,” Deadpool raised a finger, cutting Mat off before he could speak. “Before you get mad at me, I have information! Although, I can't really say it...”

“What? Why?” Matt asked impatiently.

“There's an... associate of mine who needs to speak with you. He's got the information about the offworlders and Dream, but...”

“But what?”

“You won't like it...”

“Spit it out already!” Every second he wasted here was another second where Tommy was getting further away.

“I can’t say anything, you have to come with me.” Deadpool insisted. Matt gave him what he hoped was a stern look, but the mercenary raised his hands defensively, “You won’t come if I just tell you and part of the deal was to get you there, you leave me no choice! I swear, you’ll want to hear what he has to say!”

Matt sighed, this was going to be a long and tiring night.

“All the traps are loaded,” Niki said, closing the now empty shulker.

They had done it. After three days of hard work, the no-man’s land was ready for the oncoming war.

Niki took a deep breath and let it out slowly in a puff of white mist. She looked at the bright blue sky of this new world and thought that, despite everything, it didn’t look that much different from the one back home.

She wondered what Ranboo and Tubbo were doing right now. Were they safe? Had they found anything? The last message they had sent reported that they were staying at the Spider kid’s home and that they were safe.

What about Tommy though?

Was he alright?

Techno suspected that Tommy had already found a way to slip out of Dream's grasp. Otherwise the green bastard would have moved ahead with his grand plan by now.

Phil, in his mother-hen fashion, worried that Tommy hadn't escaped and that Dream was probably waiting for some other factors to come into play before he began.

Either way, they had no time to waste. The plan was simple:

Set traps, capture one of the enemy forces for information, and... if possible, kill or disable the rest.

Niki hugged her arms around herself, partly to brace against the morning chill and partially because she was scared.

She hadn't actually taken a life before.

Techno noticed her distress and squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. They had talked about it a lot while preparing for this encounter.

"Phil?" She had started once, hesitantly. "You two have been on a lot more servers than me..."

"Oh yeah, we've traveled a fair bit, why?" The avian had said cheerfully as he continued applying potion effects to his arrows.

"Have you ever... you know, killed somebody?"

"Oh, of course! Loads of people!" Phil laughed easily, "We once took over an entire world you know."

“I mean when it mattered,” Niki had pressed. “Have you killed someone knowing they won’t come back?”

The old avian had given her a sympathizing look at that, realizing what she was asking him. “I’m not proud of it,” he had said after a long pause. “But sometimes, you have to do what you have to do.” He’d dropped the arrow he’d been working on then, and gave Niki his full attention. His eyes were intense, a bit too bright, a bit too old for that face. “Niki, listen to me,” he’d said, “If it comes down to it I don’t want you hesitating, you hear me? If it’s between you and them, you choose you!”

You choose you. That’s what Phil had said. Was it really that easy though? Those people... they were just regular players, did they deserve to die? It wasn’t their fault Dream was controlling them.

She took out her trident, gripping it tightly to stop her hands from shaking. She’d almost killed one of them already—the guy in the weird flying armor with no wings. It had all happened so fast - in the heat of the battle she hadn’t had time to think about what she was doing but now...

“They’re ahead,” Phil reported as he landed, perching atop the storage room facility Niki and Techno were standing by. “There’s six of them, mostly the same guys from last time.”

“Just six?” Niki asked, eyebrows rising in disbelief. “I was expecting him to bring out a whole army.”

“We don’t know how many lives we have here, canon or otherwise,” Phil said sternly. “I want both of you to be very careful! Shield in one hand, weapon in the other, and always be ready to grab a totem!”

Technoblade sighed but nodded, they knew better than to say anything that would set the old man on another endless safety lecture. “Phil’s right. Plus we shouldn’t underestimate our enemy,” he cautioned. “The fact that they’re just six only goes to show how strong they are.”

“Oh, they’re amazing!” Dream said excitedly, “They're called The Avengers, Earth's greatest defenders, or so I'm told.”

Niki froze at those words, slowly turning around to find the green bastard who was just standing there nonchalantly, leaning against a wall. Immediately Techno stepped forward, pulling out the Axe of Peace. A second later Niki and Phil were beside him, their weapons similarly drawn and ready for battle.

“Aw, come on! Don’t be like that!” Dream said, his tone still relaxed and a bit amused. “Is this how you greet an old friend?” No one was going to let him speak though. “Wait a second!” he shouted hurriedly as he ducked under the Axe of Peace and then had to dodge Niki’s trident and Phil’s sword.

Dream danced effortlessly, moving as if gravity had no hold on him. He dodged blow after blow as all three of them moved in unison to corner him, until... The axe’s blade finally sliced through Dream’s body, distorting the image just for a bit before it returned to normal.

They all froze, not really sure what had happened. Niki could swear she had seen the netherite pass through Dream’s body so why... How was he still standing? She moved in and jabbed her trident into Dream, the blade passing through his body with no resistance, as if through air.

“Pff...” Dream burst into laughter then, no longer able to contain himself. “Oh, you should see your faces!” He mocked, wheezing between the words. “Did you really think I was actually here? You guys must be more stupid than you look!”

"Why are you here, Dream?" Technoblade asked, cutting through the laughter.

"To accept your surrender, of course!" Dream replied with a sly grin. "As Phil said, my people are moving in as we speak. This is your last chance to end this before things get ugly."

"Not happening," Niki snarled.

"And why not? I'm not planning on bothering you guys." Dream said. "You can go back to the SMP and do whatever you want. Run an ice cream shop, rebuild L'Mamberg, or sinc the entire server into anarchy, I don't care. If you go, I promise you'll never see me again!"

"Sure," Phil interjected, "as soon as we get Tommy, we'll do just that."

"Come now, you don't mean to say you're doing all this for him, are you? He betrayed you! He's just an annoying kid. I'll get him out of your hair, and you'll never have to deal with his annoying, snotty—" An arrow lodged itself in the wall where Dream's head should have been, cutting his tirade short. "Alright, if that's how you want it," he said bitterly, stepping aside so that the arrow wouldn't be in his face. "I have to warn you though, we're not going to hold back this time." And with that, his image disappeared.

A small mechanical bug tried to skitter away from them, but Niky pinned it to the ground with her trident. She looked to Techno, her anger bubbling up. "Let's end this quickly."

Tony Stark was sitting in his office in the Avengers Tower. Four monitors were in front of him, each showing his teammates on the move. The shakier feed, running alongside the group, came from the armored suit. The other three, capturing a bird's-eye view, were the battle drones, ready to provide support.

All of it was completely automatic, Friday was controlling each element with precision to ensure they maintained the most strategically advantageous positions at all times.

Tony's presence was largely ornamental, a mere afterthought. He was tapped into the suit's sensory feed, enabling him to hear and communicate with the team as if he were physically present except...

Except if something happened he wouldn't be able to do anything.

Except if things went south he'd be back at the tower, safe, while his friends risked their lives.

And worse - what if Peter needed him? He tried to move his right arm, but his shoulder screamed in agony and he gave up.

Tony still remembered the panic he'd felt when Friday had reported that Peter's signal had vanished, and the suit's tracking was disabled. He'd thought the offworlders kidnapped him or something!

Tony had made Friday search through every camera footage in the city for signs of the kid or any of the offworlders but to no avail.

As a last resort, he'd deployed some StarkTech drones to manually search for them. He had stayed up late into the night, scouring the data until finally, Friday had reported Peter's location at 20 Ingram Street in Queens.

The sheer relief that had flooded him after he made sure the kid was safe was almost immediately followed by anger and frustration. What was he thinking?! He'd not only managed to hack into the 'Training Wheels Protocol' but he had also evaded the city's surveillance cameras, making it impossible to locate him! Was he trying to give Tony a heart attack? He swore he'd never have any kids of his own, surely he didn't have as much white hair before he met the kid!

Once Peter had noticed the drone he'd left a message with it before sending the machine back.

Hi, Mr. Stark! It's me, Peter. I, uh... We're alright! I'm alright! It's just that... um... So these offworlders aren't our enemies! Not really, I promise. It's all a misunderstanding! The bad guy's name is Dream or something but... I've got the two offworlders, we're going to find proof so we don't need to fight anymore, so... I'm not taking them back to the tower... please don't be mad? Okay, bye!

"That's all of it?" Fury had asked once Tony had shown it to all of them. He'd looked at Tony with a mixture of concern and frustration etched on his face that was all too familiar, but the billionaire wasn't about to sympathize. He had just shrugged - gesturing vaguely toward the screen where Peter's message was playing again in the background. "And you can't find him?"

“He’s home,” Tony had said tersely.

"He fucking took them to his-" Fury began to swear, his face buried in his palm.

“What did you expect?” Tony had asked, no longer able to contain the anger boiling inside him. “You sent a kid in when it should have been one of us! You’re lucky he’s okay or-”

“Or what, Stark?” Fury had erupted. “What would you have done?”

“Calm down, the both of you.” Steve, ever the peacemaker, intervened. “Let’s focus on what we can do moving forward,” he’d said sternly, moving in to stand between the two as he continued the meeting.

The kid had claimed that this group of offworlders wasn’t the enemy. That it was Dream who they were after. That was fine and all, but how were they supposed to handle this misunderstanding when the other group refused to even speak with them?

“We need to capture them,” Fury had insisted. “Once they’re under control we can figure out if they’re friend or foe.”

“Peter is currently with two of them,” Tony had reminded him, “Completely unsupervised, I might add. What will happen when they find out we captured their friends?”

“We’ll keep things under wraps,” Steve had promised. “Plus, Peter’s a strong kid, I doubt they’d be able to do anything to him even if they were malicious.”

Tony seethed with frustration, but there wasn't much he could do in that situation. It would have been damn useful to have a small army of robots right about now. If it hadn’t been for Ultron destroying most of his other suits...

“Tony, you with us?” Steve asked, bringing him out of his useless worrying and back to the present.

“Yeah, I’m here,” Tony sighed, turning his attention back to the task at hand. Peter was fine. He was a superpowered teenager with a couple of offworlders in a city full of supervillains...

What could go wrong?

“We’re here,” Steve said. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

Tony took a closer look but didn't immediately notice anything unusual. It was just a junkyard in front of a storage warehouse, piles of rusted, twisted metal and broken machinery scattered haphazardly. Tires and other car parts were strewn around with random crates and barrels, some more whole than others.

It wasn't anything unusual really, except... the way it was all laid out was a bit strange. A bit deliberate.

A bit like a maze.

“Oh, great! They’ve made traps,” Barton said with fake cheer.

“Tony, you mind giving us a better view?” Steve asked, pointing at one of the drones above them.

Tony nodded and Friday began moving the drones - spreading them apart and angling them in a way that would cover the whole maze in front of them.

Arrows struck before they’d had the opportunity to take a good look.

“What the...” Tony stuttered as he watched the three drones, sparks flying and smoke billowing as they fell into pieces on his fourth monitor, the only one that hadn’t gone dark. “These were armored drones...”

“Alright, they have more tricks up their sleeve it seems,” Steve said in resignation. “We’re also prepared for this though. Keep your heads straight and we can beat them.”

“Do you think there's any chance, they... you know, come to us instead of us going to them?” Sam, ever hopeful, asked.

“Highly doubt it,” Barton said grimly. “Looks like they’ve set the board for us.”

The offworlders appeared then, stepping out of the warehouse. All geared up and ready for a fight, they looked just as menacing as that first day.

“Everyone ready?” Steve asked.

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” Barton answered, notching an arrow onto his bow as he moved.

“Let’s go, we don’t have time to waste,” Nat said, her expression a storm as they all moved forward to face their opponents.

This was not going to be like last time though. This time they outnumbered the offworlders two to one and Tony and Steve had made sure they were prepared to face them.

Two to one weren’t the best odds Phil had faced, but they certainly weren’t the worst either.

He was worried about Tubbo and Ranboo though. Was Dream aware of their whereabouts? Or did he not really think of them as a threat? They both had armor and plenty of potions though, not to mention Ranboo could teleport. They should be fine.

He watched disapprovingly as the group of six colorful people approached, entering the maze. They had designed the traps specifically to cram a large group together, forcing them into a single file where one person's misstep could lead to the demise of a dozen others, but with so few people entering the barricades... It was a bit disappointing. They had put in a lot of work to make those. Not to mention a lot of TNT.

"They're coming," Niki said and moved to intercept the enemy, but Techno stopped her.

"Let them clear the traps first, that should eat at their resources a bit at least," he said calmly. "Hopefully it'll make them show us some of their tricks as well."

"The elytron is there though," Phil said with a grimace. "I'll have to deal with him before I can start carpet bombing them with arrows and potions."

"That weird red-armored guy can also fly," Niki added.

Techno nodded and thought about it for a bit. "Try to deal with the elytron first while they're crossing the no-man's land," he said finally. "Me and Niki will keep fancy armor grounded if he tries to follow."

Phil nodded with a grin as he spread his wings. "That shouldn't be too hard."

Tony sent the armor suit forward, entering the maze after Widow. They had the advantage in numbers so the plan was for Nat and the suit to deal with the offworlder woman with the trident. Sam and Barton would go after Bird Guy and Thor and Steve would have to deal with Technoblade. The offworlder god had managed to beat Thor last time but against both him and Captain America? He wouldn't stand a chance.

The maze itself wasn't anything spectacular. Tall, uneven walls of piled garbage and narrow, winding pathways formed from a chaotic arrangement of rusty metal sheets, tattered fabrics,

and decaying machinery. If he still had his drones he'd be able to navigate it with ease, but now... They moved slowly through it, careful around each corner, wary of any surprises.

"Falcon, what's the enemy doing?" Cap asked over the comms.

"They're just standing there, waiting for us..."

"Be careful," Barton warned, "There are tripwires."

Tony turned the feed up, scanning the air above them. He briefly considered flying over the whole thing, but that would leave Nat without support. He thought about sending out more drones, but they would take too long to get there. Plus, they would just be shot down like before so it was usele- Suddenly the ground beneath the suit gave in slightly with a loud click.

"Fuck," was all Tony had the time to say before the armor suit launched towards Natasha, enveloping her as a large explosion erupted beneath them.

A loud boom shook the feed, the ground beneath them had exploded sending shrapnel flying through the air. It set off a chain reaction, more explosions happening down the path they'd come from, closing their way back.

The suit had shielded Nat from the worst of the damage, but the force of the blast still rocked them, his heads-up display lighting up with alerts and warnings.

Tony activated the suit's thrusters to regain footing. Once the smoke cleared he looked around, the makeshift maze was in flames as the explosion had set some of the crates on fire. Walls of flaming debris collapsed, adding to the chaos and making moving through it more challenging.

"You alright?" he asked through the suit.

"Yeah, I'm alive," Nat answered. Her vitals showed an increased heart rate, but otherwise, the suit had taken the brunt of it.

Tony looked at the small model of the suit that was showing on the bottom left screen - parts of the right leg and a bit of the torso were damaged, but not breached. According to Friday, they had taken 20% damage.

“There's TNT in the crates!” Steve shouted over the line, his ears no doubt ringing as both he and Thor withstood another explosion.

“There are cobwebs as well!” Barton complained. “And be careful of those viles they throw around! They’re not fucking around!”

Just as the initial explosions subsided though the suits’ alert systems blared, bringing Tony’s attention back right in time to see a barrage of arrows coming straight at them, the flying offworlder swooping in, Falcon hot on his tail.

“Hold on!” Tony said to Natasha as he swerved out of their way. He couldn’t avoid all of them though and the minute they made contact new system alerts came in, Friday giving a warning:

System instability detected. A breach has been detected. Approximate damage observed - 15%.

What the fuck? Was that caused by the arrows?

Projectiles analyzed, covered in a potent corrosive agent. Potential compromise to suit integrity and offensive systems. Recommended tactical adjustments to minimize exposure.

“Let’s move quickly,” Nat said as she took control of the suit and began running through the maelstrom of fire and destruction, determined to escape the blazing labyrinth. Tony left the controls to her, focusing instead on highlighting potential traps in her path as she went.

Maybe in some ways, it was better that he wasn’t physically present, even with a shield he doubted he’d be able to cover both of them from that explosion.

The explosions had torn the no man's land to high heaven, even more so than Niki had expected. There was something about this world - the explosions carried more weight, and the fires took longer to die down. What kind of mod was this?

As she watched the wall of flames they had caused, she finally noticed a figure emerging.

It was him—the armored guy she'd nearly killed last time. He seemed to have recovered rather quickly though. The red and gold of the armor were a bit blackened from the soot in the air, and there were a few places where it seemed bent and misshaped. It had clearly taken some damage from the traps unlike Niki's armor, which was freshly mended before the fight.

"Come back for more, have we?" she called out, taunting her opponent as she pulled out her trident.

"More?" a metallic voice asked from within the armor. "Sure, but you won't take me by surprise this time," he warned. "Let's see if your trident can keep up with innovations from this century."

With that, the armor unraveled, opening up like the maw of a beast to reveal a short but deadly-looking woman in black. Niki took a step back, suddenly uneasy as the now-empty armor resealed and began advancing on her alongside the woman.

They were coming. There was no time to hesitate. Niki threw her trident through the air, aiming for the Armor, but the weapon clanged uselessly, embedded in the ground as the figure dogged out of the way. The black-clad woman took the opportunity to strike back, small daggers and well-measured kicks forcing Niki back behind her shield. She was fast and sly, her daggers searching for gaps in her armor.

Niki called back her weapon, the trident singing through the air as it came back, purposefully angling it in a way that would bash the Armor on its way back. It wasn't a hit strong enough

to cause any real damage, especially since it was just an empty shell, but it was a matter of principle more than anything.

"You couldn't beat me last time so now you're sending a golem and a woman to fight me instead?" she taunted them again.

"Well, I would have come in person," the empty Armor shrugged, "But you did a number on my shoulder last time."

The Armor was a good head taller than Niki, but so was Techno. And Phil. And a good chunk of the server. She wasn't about to be intimidated by height alone, but the two of them with the woman were a deadly combo. The Armor was aiming high while the woman struck low, trying to keep Niki on the defense.

Undeterred, Niki spun, drawing on every trick she had learned from Techno. In one fluid motion, she spun the trident - blocking the oncoming fist of the armor to the left and deftly parried the dagger to the right. She finished the move by swiftly turning the trident, ramming the butt of its long handle into the woman's stomach, disrupting the coordinated assault.

She couldn't help but wince at the other woman's grimace of pain but then had to quickly dodge out of the way of one of the daggers.

Right.

In a battle, there was no place for mercy.

"Try blasting her from afar," Tony instructed Friday and the suit followed his orders, firing a few blaster rounds, grazing the side of the offworlder woman.

Her armor took the hit, but she still undoubtedly felt the impact so she quickly maneuvered herself, forcing Nat to come in the line of fire.

Tony cursed, shutting off the blasters immediately.

“Ok, we’ll do this the hard way - Friday, engage the hand-to-hand protocols.” he conceded, directing the armor suit to shoot forward, moving in for close-range combat.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

Natasha barely managed to lift her dagger in time to stop the descending trident, but her foe wasn’t done. She caught Nat’s blade between two prongs, twisted hard, and wrenched it out of the former spy’s hands. Tony moved in, buying time as Nat recovered.

They had the advantage of numbers over the offworlders, but the woman was still very skilled.

Tony managed to evade the first hit but took the second to the shoulder and then the feed tumbled down as the woman deftly swept the suit's legs from beneath it using the trident's extended handle. A resounding clang reverberated as she attempted to impale the armor-suit while it was down, but without the lightning behind it, the weapon lacked the force needed to break through.

Nat stepped in then, a flurry of knives, giving him enough time to get back to his feet and the three of them fell into a seamless dance, trident against iron fists and Natasha’s daggers.

She’s not using her lightning powers , Tony thought, leaving Friday to deal with the blow-by-blow and looking down to read through the analysis from the scanners. It showed that no electric charge was detected.

Was she saving it for something? He was increasingly worried that it might be some sort of scheme. She probably couldn’t use it all the time and was waiting to strike when they had their guards down or something.

It bothered him, but there was nothing he could do about it besides remain on high alert.

They had split up with their foes in mind, dividing their team in such a way that they would have the advantage. And it seemed to be working.

Despite the unexpected obstacle course, no one had been heavily injured, and their foes were on the back foot so...

Everything was going according to plan!

Technoblade felt like he was being mocked. Surely the two guys headed towards him had to be making fun of him.

Thor, like before, carried only his hammer while the other, dressed in a ridiculous tight blue suit, carried only a shield. Maybe between the two of them, they could make a fully armed fighter.

But Chat's reaction made him pause and rethink his appraisal of the two.

I can't watch! The blorbos are fighting!

Techno, you gonna fight with just a potato in hand?

Watch out guys, Techno's bringing his unbeatable strategy: 'Charge in and hope for the best'!

Techno frowned. Why were they so excited about this fight?

The dust from the last two explosions settled, and his two adversaries approached. The traps had proven far less effective than he'd hoped, their opponents looked bruised and battered but didn't seem all that worse for wear.

Techno raised his shield and braced himself. He did have to admit that Thor wasn't exactly a lightweight and the guy next to him looked strong too, it was just that... What could he even do with just a shield?

"Do you still insist on fighting us?" The blue suit asked.

"Do you still refuse to give Teseus back?" Techno asked in turn.

The blue suit looked down as if disappointed. "There's no way to convince you, is there?" he asked, and when Techno didn't answer he just nodded. "Well, we'll just have to beat the truth into you then."

Techno just raised an eyebrow, a chorus of 'cringe' sounding off from the voices.

Give him some slack, he old!

"You can certainly try," Techno shrugged and attacked. He didn't give them any time to think as he shot a rocket from his preloaded crossbow at Thor then turned to the new guy, axe coming down hard. He needed to see what this guy was capable of since chat wouldn't tell him anything useful.

He had anticipated that the guy would raise his shield. What he hadn't predicted, however, was the aftermath.

A burst of sparks erupted from the point of impact, the sound of it almost deafening, sending a shockwave so strong that it shoved both of them backward, the errant energy rippling through the air, almost visible.

Okay, so this wasn't just a shield, he thought to himself, shaking the dizziness away amid chat's laughter.

Technoblade had barely enough time to stand back up when Thor was on him. The lightning god seemed pissed, dealing blow after blow and forcing Techno on the defense.

One hit, second hit, third- the shield gave.

Techno grit his teeth and shook the useless piece of wood off, his arm tingling from the force of the blows. He tried to shoot the second crossbow he'd prepared, but the blue suit came in, deflecting the rocket into the air.

Techno threw a harming potion down, using it as a distraction so he could pull out another shield and load another rocket on the crossbow, Quick charge coming in clutch. He didn't have the opportunity to fire though as both his opponents came in hot - flanking him. He pulled back swiping wide, not letting them surround him.

This was bad. Techno's potion effects were beginning to run out, already he felt a bit weaker, a bit slower, but his opponents wouldn't relent. They were good, timing their attacks exactly, always keeping him on the back foot, but Thor was too eager. He jumped in too far, falling for Techno's feign, and would have lost his head if the blue suit hadn't covered him.

A flurry of arrows shot down, most embedding themselves uselessly in the dirt, but a few found their mark slowing down Thor and the blue suit.

Phil!

Dadzaaa!

Techno spared a glance up at his partner just as he spun, evading the enemy's projectiles. He didn't look like he was winning though. Niki was similarly occupied though she seemed to be holding out better than them.

This wasn't good. At this rate, they would exhaust their resources before the enemy did. But well, in the midst of chaos, there was also opportunity.

It was time to call in the special reinforcements.

Tommy couldn't sleep. He was lying in a bed for the first time in... a month? Maybe more? He had a soft pillow and a warm blanket and he was clean and warm and full of delicious pizza and just... felt restless. He groaned and stood up. This wouldn't do, he needed to burn out a bit of energy before he could properly fall asleep.

Tommy climbed onto the rooftop easily enough and looked over the city, stretching his wings out with a sigh. The biting wind nipped at him, but the magic burning through his veins kept him warm enough. It had been a long time, far too long, since he'd been able to let loose like this. Magic took a lot out of him, energy that he either didn't have or was saving for when he really needed it.

Tonight though he wasn't out as a vigilante, he'd put on the mask more out of habit than necessity. He jumped from rooftop to rooftop, watching the people below. No sirens wailed in the distance, no shouts of distress pierced the night. For a moment, everything was peaceful.

On one hand that was nice, he wasn't out looking for trouble after all, but on the other - it left him to his thoughts. Once he'd made a lap of his usual route he sat on one of the rooftops, leaning against a warm vent, and just... breathed.

Now that his mind was clearer due to being well-fed and rested he couldn't help but think - what was he doing? What was he going to do?

He could try to go back to the server. Phil would probably take him in. Techno would scoff, but he'd never been able to stay mad at Tommy for long. And Will would-

His mind hitched at the thought, the smell of gunpowder filling his nose as past events played out. No, he couldn't go back. He betrayed them, he... he'd caused them enough pain already.

If he wasn't going back though he needed to figure out how to live in this new world. Karen, Foggy, and Matt were nice and all, but he couldn't impose on them forever. Prime only knew how long they'd put up with him anyway. Tommy planned on staying with them for just a few more days. Maybe a week... just enough to get a bit of rest before he continued with his revenge.

Prime, the revenge... All those plans he'd made. Why did it feel so hollow all of a sudden? He knew, okay? He knew Josh wouldn't want any of this, but Tommy couldn't just let it go. He still felt that anger within him, that hatred and hurt. Dream and Kingpin had hurt too many people, they needed to be stopped. But the way he'd previously gone about it... he cringed at the memory. Maybe... just maybe he could take that red-suited bastard up on his offer. That way, as much as he hated to admit it - he'd be of some actual use. Maybe even make a positive change for once.

Fuck, was he actually considering this? Tommy sighed and stood up. It was getting pretty late, he should head back and get some sleep. He'd decide what to do in the morning, for now though, he didn't want to worry Matt too much.

Tommy had been very surprised to finally meet Josh's lawyer. Matt seemed like a nice guy. The way he looked past you instead of at you was a bit unnerving, but he couldn't really blame him for that. If being a vigilante didn't work out for him, Tommy thought with a smirk, at least he knew a good lawyer.

It was around 1 AM when Tommy was a few blocks away from the flat. He'd pretty much tired himself out at this point and couldn't wait to get back to his warm bed when a smidge of blue caught his eye.

Ghostbur? Heart racing he scrambled towards it. At first, there was just a trail of droplets, then a footprint, and then... the traces disappeared.

"Ghostbur!" Tommy shouted, looking around frantically, "Are you here?"

Could it have been just some pain or something? Who would carry just a bucket of blue paint over the rooftops though? And it was a very specific shade - a deep lapis blue, just like the specter's.

He turned around, scanning the rooftops, and... There! A blue handprint on the wall! He rushed over, tentatively reaching his own hand towards it. It was slightly bigger than his with long slender fingers. It had to be his, it had to be Wilbur's!

"I-I'm sorry, okay? Can you... can we..." his voice echoed loudly, but there was no response. "I just want to talk..."

A blue silhouette passed through his periphery and Tommy turned just in time to see the ghost phase through the wall of a building. He scrambled after Ghostber, hoping he could catch up. He knew he said some fucked up shit last time they spoke, he needed to apologize. He'd just gotten close to one of the building's windows, broken by the Wither attack when the sound of a familiar voice made him freeze in place.

"Fine, you've made your point. I'll work with you."

That was... that was Daredevil, wasn't it? It was coming from the room Ghostbur had gone into.

"I'm glad we were able to come to an agreement."

"Shut up, just keep your end of the bargain," Daredevil said bitterly.

Tommy couldn't be a hundred percent sure who the second person was, he thought he recognized the second voice, but... well, he'd only heard Kingpin speak once. He moved in closer, trying to be as quiet as possible. He peeked carefully through the window and... Yeah, that was Daredevil alright. Negotiating with Kingpin and that other red suit he'd seen with Sapnap.

"I'll only help you catch him," Daredevil said. "What you do with him after is none of my business."

Him? Who would they... His blood began to boil. Kingpin was working for Dream, there was only one *him* they could be talking about. That bastard Daredevil! He was supposed to be on the good side! Josh had fucking trusted him!

Chapter End Notes

I have a large chunk of the next two chapters ready, but... some parts are giving me trouble so no promises as to when they're coming out.

Chapter 14

Chapter by [Sunfish \(FightingAgainstTheDawn\)](#)

Wade was playing with fire, and he knew it. He'd agreed to arrange this meeting fully aware it was gonna be a shitshow, but somehow he hadn't imagined things quite like this.

He'd managed to stop Daredevil's billy clubs, but... he was pretty sure his arm was broken, and Wesley's knife was currently lodged between his buttcheeks. Well, the important thing was that he'd stopped the fight, for now at least. The golden rule when introducing a cat and a dog was to give them enough time to get used to each other's presence without being able to rip each other to shreds.

"Deadpool, please, for the love of God, tell me your informant isn't Kingpin," Daredevil said through gritted teeth. Wade didn't need clairvoyance to know his arm wouldn't be the only thing broken if he didn't speak fast.

"Aw, come on, Red, don't be like that," he tried to lighten the mood, though he could practically feel the tension crackling in the air. "I did warn you you won't like it."

Kingpin, meanwhile, was just chilling like they were at a fancy tea party and Wesley's knife was making itself a little too cozy in his nether regions. "Gentlemen, please," the crime lord interjected smoothly, his voice a stark contrast to the heated exchange. "Let's stop fighting and talk. We have bigger fish to fry."

"You shut up!" Daredevil snapped, then turned his glare back to Wade. "Tell me you're not working for him!"

"Well..." Wade scratched the back of his head, caught between a rock and... a sharp place? Another rock? Whatever it was, it was super uncomfortable.

"Come now Daredevil, don't act so betrayed," Kingpin's laughter echoed darkly. "He's a mercenary, you know their alliances are... flexible at best."

“Hey!”

“But he did agree to arrange this meeting because I have information you need,” Kingpin continued, his tone almost taunting. “Are you sure you want to leave without hearing what I have to say at least?”

“It’s about the offworlders,” Wade added quickly, hoping that would convince the vigilante. Sure enough, Daredevil's expression stiffened, there was a storm brewing behind his mask but he seemed to be considering it. In the end, he was still visibly angry, but he lowered his clubs.

“You have five minutes,” he said tersely, pulling back a step. Wesley mirrored the movement, his presence still looming, though... the bastard didn’t retrieve his knife!

“Really? You’re just- just gonna leave that there? You don’t want it back?” Wade asked, annoyance evident in his tone.

“It’s fine,” Kingpin’s enforcer said with a hint of amusement. “It suits you. You can keep it.”

Deadpool had a mind to continue their little spout, but Kingpin cut him off, calmly speaking with DD as if the others didn’t exist.

“I take it you are aware of the group of offworlders that have appeared recently?” he asked, moving to sit behind the mahogany table that dominated the room, gesturing for Daredevil to take one of the empty plush leather chairs in front of him.

“It’d be hard not to be, they’re tearing through the city,” the vigilante said coolly, crossing his arms without moving from where he stood.

They were in one of Kingpin’s safe houses. The room was dimly lit, the only sources of light coming from a few strategically placed lamps, more there to highlight the expensive artwork that lined the walls than to provide any actual illumination.

“Yes, well, one of them came to me a while back, looking for my help. He needed my connections and influence and... I’ll admit - I underestimated him at first. He looked like a kid after all you see,” the crime lord admitted. “But he’s anything but. His name is Dream and he wants to take over our world. I have reasons to believe he may succeed if we don’t stop him.”

“Take over the world? Really?” Wade groaned. “Is it too much to ask for a bit of originality?”

Kingpin threw him a pointed look to keep his mouth shut, but Daredevil didn’t even acknowledge him. Fuck, he was mad, wasn’t he?

“Seams to me you stoked the flames and now you’re crying because you got burned,” the vigilante retorted. Kingpin’s smile became stiff at the jibe, but he wisely held his tongue. “What about To- Theseus? Where does he fit into all of this?”

“Teseus, or Tommy as I believe Dream calls him, is a young phoenix. I’m unsure as to what that means exactly, but from what I’ve seen first hand the kid has very strong fire powers. Dream needs him for something, but I don’t know exactly what.” Kingpin explained. “The kid is essential to his plans though, so if you know where he is make sure he’s safe and well away from Dream.”

Daredevil stared in the direction of the crime lord for a long moment, his expression unreadable. This was probably the first time these two agreed on something, Wade would have kooed, but he didn’t want to ruin the moment.

“What do you want from me then?” Red asked finally.

“So you’ll help?”

“I said nothing of the sort.”

Kingpin smirked, they both knew that five minutes had long passed, if the vigilante was still here it meant he was in.

“The thing is - I don’t know how to stop him,” Kingpin said solemnly. “He’s strong and there's this... god on his side...”

“God?” the vigilante asked in surprise.

“Not your god,” Kingpin said with a twinge of amusement “But a powerful one nonetheless. I’m currently biding my time, making him think I’m still working for him so I can get more information. Once I figure out what his plan is though, I’m going to need all the help I can get to stop him.”

“I might know a small group of offworlders who’d be willing to lend a hand,” Wade interjected, thinking he could finally get rid of the group of hunters currently squatting in his house. “They’re after Dream too, though I’m not sure how much help they’d actually be.”

“The ones that released the three-headed monstrosity?” Kingpin asked, speaking directly to Deadpool for the first time that evening.

“No? They said they were Hunters, the guys on the news are different.”

“So the Hunters are against Dream, what about the others?” Red asked, but Wade just shrugged. He hadn’t really stuck around the house much to find out.

“Dream laughed when he saw them fight with the Avengers, but his subordinate didn’t seem to share in his amusement,” Kingpin said, his brows knitted in thought. “Perhaps we could approach them as well, but-”

“There’s no ‘we’ in this,” Daredevil repeated stubbornly.

Kingpin's face grew dark at that, his careful poise evaporating. He looked at the vigilante, he seemed older somehow, more tired. "Do you think I like this? Do you think I enjoy grueling before my enemies for help? Or being bossed around by a little twat with no sense of respect?" he asked calmly, not raising his voice. "This is bigger than the two of us, Daredevil. He's not threatening just me, he's not even threatening just our city or country, he wants to rewrite reality and enslave us all! He's dangerous, and I'm doing everything I can to stop him. Will you join forces with me, or is your ego too big to see the bigger picture?"

Daredevil fell silent, visibly wrestling with his thoughts. He didn't seem thrilled, but ultimately, he relented, sinking into a chair. "Fine, you've made your point. I'll work with you."

"Great! Now—"

"On one condition," Red interrupted and Wade sighed, sensing where this was going. "We only work to catch the offworlders and send them back."

Kingpin's jaw clenched. Wade could practically see the gears grinding in Fisk's head.

"This- might be more difficult than you think," the crime lord warned. "They're... Dream doesn't see us as humans. He thinks of us as a type of lower being, NPCs, a means to an end. He won't have any qualms about killing us - men, women, children, it doesn't matter to him. Do you think we will win if you hold back against such an enemy?" Kingpin asked. "How many people are you willing to sacrifice for your morality?"

Wade watched as Daredevil took these words in and wrestled with his thoughts. He could kinda see Kingpin's point here. Principles were fine and all, but it came a point where they started getting in your way.

On one hand Daredevil annoyed the mercenary. This was the real world, Boy Scout morality had no place here. This wasn't just about their usual cat-and-mouse game of justice, but about the survival of their world.

Dream was a whole new level of crazy—a reality-bending psycho with no regard for human life, this would have been enough for any sane person to agree to off him, but Daredevil...

Well, on the other hand, Wade would lie if he said that the vigilantes' stubbornness wasn't one of his sexiest traits. It was nice to know that there was at least one decent guy out there, watching over the them.

"You may have a point..." Daredevil said, his voice tight with resignation. "But I can't compromise on this." There was a long pause before the vigilante looked up from his clenched fists and said, "I'll only help you catch him. What you do with him after is none of my business."

They stared at each other for a moment, taking each other's measure. Kingpin was about to say something, but whatever it was I'd died on his tongue as a loud crash sounded. All three of them, Daredevil, Wesley and Deadpool, jumped to their feet, weapons in hand. The temperature in the room rose drastically as if they had found themselves in a house fire suddenly.

Deadpool turned just in time to see the blazing red wings of the offworlder boy spread open as he declared loudly.

"You want to catch me eh? Well, here I am!"

Tubbo grit his teeth and tried to remain calm as he skipped over yet another word that he couldn't translate. Two hours had passed since they got the news of the fight between the Syndicate and the Avengers. Two hours they had spent here, in this strange machinery room, finally doing something that would help them find Tommy, and yet...

He couldn't figure it out. The Code was right in front of him and he couldn't understand enough of it to make sense of things. They just didn't know enough of the language. The pronunciation was lost to time. Maybe Phil could help them more, but with the fight began he couldn't call him even if he wanted to. Between the two of them Tubbo and Ranboo knew all the enchantments, Ranboo recognized a few other words on top, and that was pretty much all they had.

What were they going to do? If Techno lost and they couldn't get the Code to work then what? The nerves were beginning to get to him. What if Techno had been right? What if they had stood more of a chance together? What if he'd doomed them, doomed Tommy...

"I think there's a pattern to this," MJ said from across the table, startling the goat hybrid out of his spiraling thoughts. Peter's friends were calm, it had initially rubbed Tubbo the wrong way - didn't they know that lives were at risk here? But now it grounded him - MJ was calmly analyzing the available information, unlike him. "The letters and the symbols in these wards are all the same length. I feel like we could maybe match the letters to the symbols?"

Ned, who was still tinkering with the disassembled communicator, looked over her shoulder and scrunched up his brows in thought, "Wait, could this be...?" He rolled his chair back over to the machine he'd been working on and typed something quickly before slapping his forehead loudly. "I can't believe I didn't see this earlier!"

Tubbo rose at that, what had he seen? Did he find something that could help? He went over to check and to his immense surprise, he saw Enchanter script on the monitor despite it not being connected to the communicator. And it was the whole alphabet - written out and matched to every letter just as MJ had suggested.

"How?!" he asked, amazed beyond words. Ranboo and Peter joined them to look, the excitement drawing their attention.

"This language, well... it's not really a language... it's SGA!" Ned said with excitement, "Standard Galactic Alphabet, it's used in a lot of games! It's a sypher!"

"But, that's enchanter script," Ranboo said, a quizzical expression on his face as he grappled with the conundrum. "It's a dead language from our world. How do you know how to read it?"

"I have no idea, dude," Ned shook his head. "The symbols match and what's even better - we won't even need to translate this manually! There are already websites that can do that for us!"

“What’s a web site? A spider spawner?” Ranboo asked to Ned’s amusement.

“Ha! It’s the lab after Peter’s first experimental web formula!” Ned laughed, teasing Peter before turning back to his machine, “It’s this here - “ Before Tubbo could understand what was happening, Ned had entered a portion of the Code into the little box... And it was directly translated into common.

“That’s amazing! How did you do that?!”

“I’m just a genius!” Ned said happily, puffing up his chest.

“You just copy-pasted it,” MJ deadpaned and moved in closer to take a look. “This looks like normal programming code though.”

“Okay, I can work with this! It’s basically Java!” Ned said, loudly cracking his knuckles as he looked over the translations.

The tight knot that had formed at the pit of Tubbo’s stomach loosened slightly, a mixture of astonishment and relief flooding him as he sat back down next to Ned and MJ. They were one step closer, and now that the Code was in common he could actually try and figure it out.

“So if this communicator can work like a console, maybe we could try finding the command for teleporting?” the boy began, already thinking of ways to hack into the system, but Tubbo stopped him.

“No can do, bossman,” he said calmly, turning all his attention to the task at hand. “Only the admin can write commands, we don’t have access.”

“Right...” Ned nodded and thought about it for a bit. “You said that this code basically controls reality though, right? Maybe we can make you admins?”

“No, only another admin can do that,” Ranboo shook his head. “I don’t know if even Dream counts as an admin in this world.”

“What can we do then?” Ned asked, his voice tinged with exasperation.

“We still have access to the code... Can’t we rewrite its programming then? Make it so it’s not a communicator, but something else?” MJ asked.

“We’ve never tried...” Tubbo murmured with uncertainty. The Code determined what the object was and how it functioned, so what MJ was suggesting wasn’t too far-fetched. “We don’t usually have access to the Code of the world, but I think it might work. What would we make though?”

“The guys who hunted Dream in the past used to have these compasses,” Ranboo said tentatively. “Could we make something like that, but to track Tommy instead?”

“A Hunter’s compass! That can work!” Tubbo agreed and they began working. It wasn't easy, they methodically worked through the intricate symbols and lines of the Code, but having translated it didn’t automatically mean they knew how it worked. Despite the deliberate pace, the trio's collaborative effort was yielding results. Ned and MJ explained how coding worked in their world as they went and slowly started building a program for the compass.

"So we need to take the code for the communicator and adapt it for the compass," said Ned, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Tubbo nodded in agreement. "Right. The communicator uses a different set of commands and protocols than a compass would, so we need to make some changes." He said as he went over the Code, tweaking lines and testing the results. It was slow going, but they were making progress.

"Maybe we need to change this line here to reflect the different magnetic fields that a compass would use," MJ suggested, pointing to a section of code. “Earth probably has a

different magnetic field from your world.”

Tubbo nodded. "Got it. And we'll need to adjust the error correction algorithms to account for the different ways that a compass might be affected by interference."

“We’ll need a way to pinpoint him.” MJ pointed out. “This can contact him right?” she asked, looking pointing at the communicator. “Can you call him?”

“I mean... I can send him a message, but what good will that do us?”

“MJ, you’re a genius!” Ned proclaimed. “If you can get him to respond we’ll be able to catch his UUID,” he explained. “If we have the UUID, we should be able to rework this to a compass trained onto his signature!”

“That... That might just work!” Tubbo exclaimed, his mind racing wild with excitement.

As they worked, bouncing ideas off each other and experimenting with different approaches, they finally hit upon a breakthrough.

"This should be it," Ned announced, wiping sweat off his brow.

Tubbo let out a whoop of excitement. He couldn’t believe it, even half expected to wake up any moment now, drooling over one of the computers, but no!

Ranboo and Peter stood up to join them at that, all of them gathering around Tubbo.

“Alright, let’s see if this works,” he said, picking up his device, still hooked up to the computer and typing something. He wrote out his message to Tommy and pressed send. They all watched as the purple script moved through the screen.

“The message...” Tubbo read, the smile on his face souring. “It doesn’t go through...”

“What does that mean?” Ranboo asked worriedly. “Is Tommy alright?”

“We haven’t received a message that he’s dead.” Tubbo reminded him, but... What if there were no death messages in this world?

“Maybe his communicator is turned off or broken?” Ned suggested and Tubbo nodded vigorously, latching onto that thought.

“Could be.”

“You guys said that the bad guy’s got Tommy, right?” MJ asked. “Maybe we can try to find him instead?”

“Yes!” Tubbo exclaimed. “Let’s try that!”

Ranboo didn’t look like he shared his excitement tonight, “Are you sure this is a good idea?” He asked tentatively.

“Why not?”

“We need to be careful,” Ranboo warned. “Talking to Dream is always a risk. What will you say?”

“I know what that bastard wants,” Tubbo said as he typed fast, not giving Ranboo enough time to stop him.

<Tubbo> Dream, I’ve got the discs. Give us Tommy and you can have them.

“Discs?” Peter asked, perplexed.

“It’s a long story,” Tubbo said, not tearing his eyes away from the screen, waiting for the reply. “For some reason, they’ve been fighting over them.”

<Dream> That’s cute. I don’t need them anymore though :)

Tubbo clenched his jaws at the mocking smile at the end.

<Tubbo> *What do you want then*

<Dream> *All of you to surrender?*

“That bastard!” Tubbo fumed.

Ranboo placed a calming hand on his shoulder, “Don’t let him get to you. That’s what he wants.”

“He gave us all we need though!” Ned said beside them. Tubbo turned just in time to see him initiating the new program they’d written. He pressed enter and...

“Was something supposed to happen?” Peter asked.

Ned frowned at the code for a second then laughed sheepishly, “I forgot to close the last column...”

He pressed enter again and this time they all had to step back as they felt the reality around them strain. Before their very eyes, the communicator shimmered, the world literally bending around it as it transformed into something rounder, a silvery compass the size of Tubbo's palm. A hunter's compass!

"We did it! We actually-" They had rewritten the communicator's code! They had touched the essence of their world and changed it! Tubbo couldn't believe it. "Let's go!" He said as he snapped out of his amazement. "We need to get Tommy while they're still distracted with the fight!"

Peter nodded and they all started packing up their things, leaving the mess of parts and cables strewn about. Tubbo felt a bit guilty about that, but there were more important things to worry about.

As they headed out of the lab, though, he couldn't help but feel a sense of pride in their accomplishment. They were going to find Tommy, and they would do it together. Maybe this world wasn't so bad after all.

He took a look at the compass in his hand, the arrow trained on a point somewhere between west and south instead of north. Pointed to where Dream was.

"We need to be careful," Ranboo said from beside him. "All we have to do is get Tommy out, we're not prepared to fight Dream head-on so we should-"

Before Ranboo could finish his sentence, Peter tackled him to the ground.

Tubbo immediately took his axe out, just in time to block the enormous claws of the monster that crashed through the wall and lunged at him.

The beast was huge, easily as tall as Ranboo, but with way more teeth than should be legal and long claws like razors. Tubbo had no idea what kind of mob it was, so thin and tall, it's skin like a piece of the void... Was this how Endermen looked on this server?

"Oh shit!" Ned shouted as he clutched the backpack with his laptop tighter to his chest, there were more mobs coming in and one had begun to move towards him and MJ. This one was a giant spider and there were zombies and skeletons coming in troves behind it. These were

definitely some kind of mob variants, but... Why were they attacking? And they weren't burning under the sunlight...

Fuck, what was he supposed to do? Tubbo thought angrily. He couldn't just run away and let their new allies die! He switched to his sword and rammed it into the Ender's belly while it was out of balance and rushed in front of Peter's friends.

"How do we fight them?" MJ asked holding one of the chairs up as a makeshift weapon/shield. "Do they have any weaknesses?"

"How the hell should I know?" Tubbo asked, trying to armor up while fending off the monsters. Despite their resemblance to the usual nightcrawlers, these mobs didn't act like they should. That one was clearly meant to be a creeper, but instead of moving silently, its four legs clinked noisily and it showed no signs of exploding despite being in range.

"Aren't they from your world?" MJ asked in alarm.

"What? No! Aren't they from yours?!" Tubbo asked, bewildered.

They had no more time for talking though as three more monsters came in and charged at them. This was bad. This was *really* bad.

Ranboo had armored up as well but, even with the both of them, Tubbo wasn't sure they stood a chance. The creatures moved with purpose, striking out with their long claws. Tubbo parried as best he could, but they hit hard - each hit pushing them back. And to top it all off they seemed impervious to pain. The fucking monster he'd stabbed earlier was up along with the rest of them seemingly not minding at all the huge hole gaping into its stomach.

Ranboo parried another slash, the claws grating against his shield as if made of metal. They couldn't fight them, they had to get away.

"*Run !*" Tubbo ordered and pulled the two humans behind him.

They ran as quickly as they could, the monsters right at their heels as they hurtled through the narrow hallways. The sound of huge bodies slamming against the wall behind them followed, but at least they weren't so fast they couldn't outrun them.

Tubbo ran blindly through the unfamiliar corridors, desperately searching for a way out.

"This way!" Ned called, pointing at a door to their right and Tubbo followed, slamming through the doors to a courtyard. The moment they were outside though he froze as he realized far too late. They hadn't managed to outrun the beasts. The beasts had herded them out.

The entire schoolyard was filled with them, all snarling and ready for dinner.

They were fucked.

"Boo!" Tubbo tried to sound calm, but his voice wavered. "Get these two out of here!"

"Right," Ranboo nodded and moved towards them, but stopped. "What about you?" He asked, panic rising. "I-I can't teleport all of you... I..."

"Just go! Take them first," Tubbo said firmly as he pulled his shield up in his left arm and downed a strength pod, preparing for the fight. "I'll be fine but I can't hold them off for long, so come back for me quickly!"

"Wait!" MJ said suddenly. "Where's Peter? We have to get him out too!"

Right, Peter. He could help them fight! Where was he though? Tubbo looked around, but couldn't see him anywhere. Shit, had they left him behind? He'd survived a beating from Techno, he couldn't have been done in by some monsters without any of them noticing, right?

“No no, let’s get out of here, Peter already left!” Ned said hurriedly, trying to pull on Ran and MJ.

“What?”

“Yeah, he... ran immediately after the monsters attacked!”

That bastard , Tubbo thought angrily, he couldn’t believe he’d just left them! Had this actually been a trap after all? Was it all part of Dream’s messed-up plans? And he’d even left his friends...

Come to think of it, why had he left his friends?

A crash was heard from behind them and Tubbo cursed, but the monsters that burst through fell down, tied up tightly in spiderweb.

“Spider-Man!” Ned shouted excitedly, “You came to save us!”

Right, secret identity, Tubbo sighed with relief and annoyance. “Was this really the time for a costume change?”

“Shh! MJ doesn’t know, plus there are cameras everywhere around school!” Peter, now in his costume, said quickly as he webbed another bunch of enemies, slowing them down.

“Fine! Take this,” Tubbo said, handing him a potion as he took a quick inventory. He had one more strength potion left and three health ones. They could-

A shadow passed over them and Tubbo’s heart skipped as he saw a huge winged figure swooping down towards them. Relief flooded him.

He'd never imagined he could be this happy to see the man who had helped destroy his country before and yet...

"That's not Phil..." Ranboo said from beside him, his voice increasingly worried. "What is--"

The winged man, Tubbo could now clearly see he looked nothing like Phil, had taken out a weapon of some sort and fired it.

All Tubbo could do was watch in horror as the projectile struck Ranboo, webbing him and then electrocuting him until the enderman passed out.

That was it, Tubbo thought, seeing red. He was going to kill them all.

Sam slumped back in his chair, a heavy sigh escaping him as he pushed away from the cluttered workbench, wiping the sweat from his brow. Sapnap jumped at that, and the creeper hybrid gave him a tired, but triumphant smile.

"They're done," he declared, pointing to the three gleaming compasses resting on the surface before him. "Took some tweaking to get them calibrated, this server is way bigger than ours apparently, but they should be good now," he explained as he handed one over.

Sapnap watched with excitement as the arrow spun madly before training resolutely to a direction that decidedly wasn't North.

Gorge joined them at the table and eyed his with a mix of curiosity and skepticism. "You sure they're working correctly now? They're pointing the right way?" he asked, spinning his compass around, trying to see if it'd lose its way if he shook it hard enough.

“As sure as I can be,” Sam replied with a shrug, “Only way we’ll know for certain is if we go there and check.”

They all fell silent at that, the excitement draining as they all thought of what came next. Sappnap sighed and sat down, the other two were looking at him expectantly as if he’d know the answer, but... What was he supposed to say? That they didn’t stand a chance against Dream? Not with just the three of them, and not when XD was with him.

And Deadpool... well...

“Do you think he’s coming back?” George asked finally. His voice was casual like he couldn’t care less, but his eyes were sharp and focused.

“I... I don’t know,” Sappnap admitted. Deadpool had gone for milk and cigarettes, as he’d put it, and they hadn’t seen him since. And even if he did come Sappnap had a feeling he wouldn’t want to help them.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Pam demanded loudly, startling Sappnap as she entered the living room, helping Al to the couch. “We’re going after him of course. He’s got Tommy!”

George sighed heavily, while Sappnap's frustration bubbled to the surface. Who did she think she was exactly?

“We? You’re free to do whatever you like,” he said tersely. “The three of us , on the other hand, will plan our attack and make sure we can win first before we charge in.”

“I’m coming with you,” she said matter-of-factly as if the decision was already made. “And we can’t afford to wait. What if he does something to Tommy while we’re sitting around waiting for-”

“There’s no chance we’re taking you with,” Sappnap cut her off. “We’re going on a dangerous mission! We won’t have time for babysitting.”

“Who will be babysitting who?” Pam asked angrily, “You were the one who broke the toaster because it ‘attacked’ you!”

“That was not my fault!” Sarnap bristled. “How was I supposed to know what was in that stupid dispenser?”

“Maybe she has a point,” Sam interjected suddenly, his voice calm amidst the rising tension. Sarnap shot him a sharp look, but the creeper hybrid just shrugged and explained. “Do we really have the luxury to wait around? We don’t know what his plans are.”

“Dream likes to be prepared,” George added. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to give him the opportunity.”

Fuck, they were right.

“Fine,” Sarnap conceded begrudgingly, “If Deadpool hasn’t come back by tomorrow, we’ll head out without him.”

“I’ll start the preparations then,” Pam offered, already moving to gather supplies, but Sarnap stopped her again.

"For the last time, we're not taking you," he declared firmly and the two of them glared at each other, both not willing to back down.

“I’m not letting you go without me!” Pam said defiantly, her fists clenching at her sides.

"And how would you stop us?" Sarnap challenged and stood up to match her stance. “You don’t have armor you don’t even have a weapon,” he reminded her pointedly. “How are you planning to fight against Dream? He’ll just slice you to bits!”

“Hey, hey, let's not start any fights amongst ourselves,” Sam intervened again, stepping in between them, “He’s right though,” he said to Pamela. “You’re... It’ll be dangerous for you to come with,” he said gently.

Pam's jaw tightened, but her resolve didn't seem to waver. "I'm not backing down, not now, not ever," she declared, squaring her shoulders and meeting their gazes with unwavering determination. “I owe it to Tommy.”

"Deadpool's stash of weapons and ammo is still here," the raspy voice of that blind croon chimed in suddenly, breaking the tension. "Underneath that creaking floorboard," she added, gesturing vaguely in the complete opposite direction of where she indicated. "Touch the angel dust and I'll have your heads, though!"

Pam smiled triumphantly and strode through the living room, lifting the board to reveal a bright pink duffle bag filled to the brim with all sorts of weapons - from knives and swords to those weird metal tube things that shot like crossbows but sounded like TNT.

“That's settled then!” She declared, eyes alight with fire. “I’m coming with you!” Sam looked like he might continue arguing, but she fixed him with a firm stare and said, "I'm going. You can't stop me."

The creeper hybrid sighed and gave a resigned nod.

“Wait, you’re agreeing with her?” Sapnap said incredulously. “Are you actually- George!” he turned to his friend for support, but George just shrugged.

"I don't care," he said simply, his tone nonchalant. "We need more people anyway."

"You... I can't believe you guys!" Sapnap sputtered in disbelief.

But the decision had been made, and the others were already beginning to file out of the room, their attention diverted to the tasks at hand and Sapnap's protest fell on deaf ears.

"Well fuck me I guess!" he muttered to himself, a bitter edge to his tone. "When Dream kills us all, I'm gonna say I told you so!"

Despite his grumbling, he followed suit though. He'd promised Dream he'd stuff him in a grave if he ever left Pandore and he was gonna keep that promise. If that chick wanted to tag along then whatever.

End Notes

Thanks a lot for reading! It would be really appreciated if you told us what you thought in the comments!

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